The New Criterion

October 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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John Marin

BETWEEN REALISM AND ABSTRACTION

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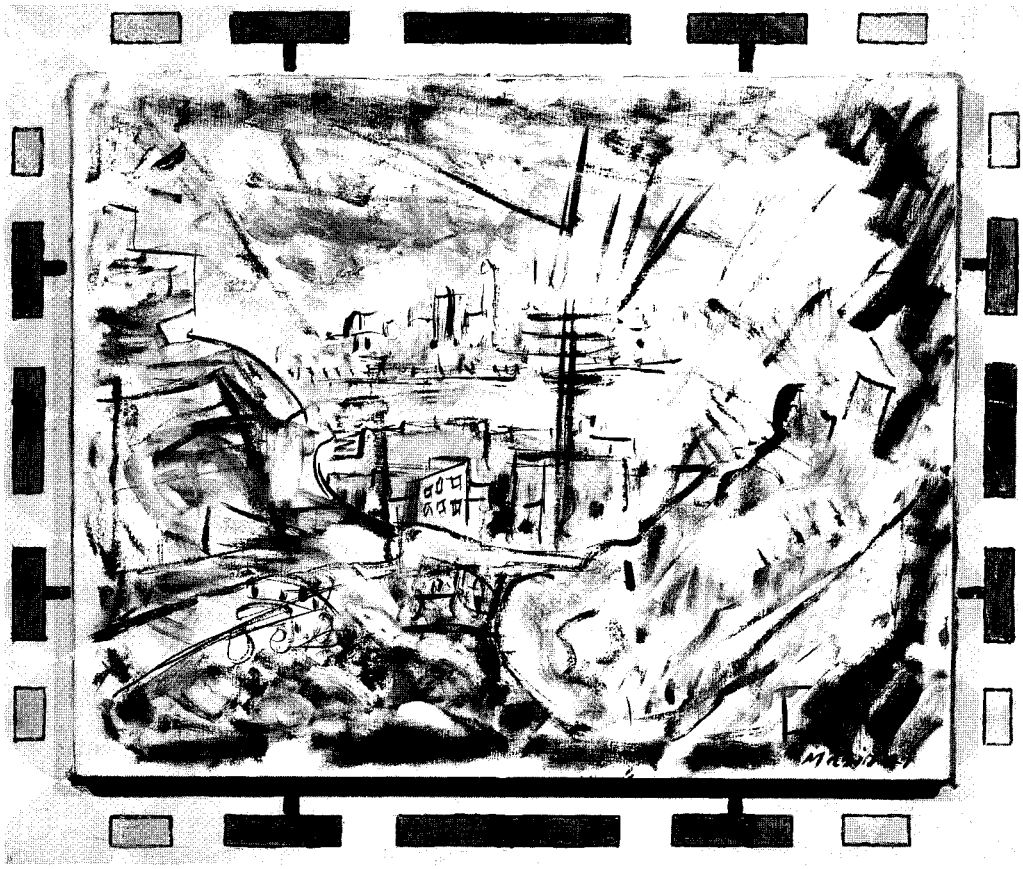

Edgewater, New Jersey, 1947; oil on canvas, 21 ½ x 28 inches

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Donald Justice's *New and Selected Poems* was published recently by Knopf.

Roger Kimball's essay in this issue is the second in his series on America's cultural revolution.

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Karen Wilkin's latest book, *Cézanne*, was published recently by Abbeville Press.

Renee Winegarten's profile "Women & Politics: Madame de Genlis" appeared in our September 1996 issue.

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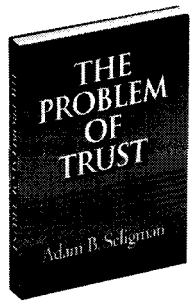
Thought-Provoking

The Problem of Trust

Adam B. Seligman



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Notes & Comments: October 1997

A "miracle" of the "Times"

In her famous "Notes on 'Camp'" from 1964, Susan Sontag observed that "many examples of Camp are things which, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or kitsch." (A "'serious' point of view"? As Sontag notes, the camp sensibility "sees everything in quotation marks," i.e., regards *nothing* as serious.) We had occasion to think back to that grim and prescient essay when the September 7 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* brought us "The Miracle in Bilbao," a stunningly unctuous paean to Frank Gehry's new building for the Guggenheim Museum in northeastern Spain.

Not having seen Mr. Gehry's latest creation, we hesitate to say much about it. Photographs of the sprawling, titanium-clad agglomeration of irregular shapes, clashing wildly with the low-rise, nineteenth-century buildings around it, lead us to suspect that it is a shinier, more grandiose version of the work that has made Frank Gehry a star for the inveterately trendy. Born Frank Goldberg in 1929, Mr. Gehry is actually a Harvard-trained architect who spent nearly two decades designing shopping centers and an off-the-rack modernist headquarters for the Rouse Company. But the Frank Gehry that matters is a taciturn, aw-shucks, denim-wearing, low-tech, man-of-the-people Californian who was reborn in the late 1970s. It was then that he enveloped his pink, two-story Dutch colonial house in Santa Monica with corrugated aluminum topped with chainlink fencing. A series of asymmetrical windows and revealed-wood framing completed the effect of radical incompleteness. It was this Frank Gehry—whom Philip Johnson anointed a few years ago as one of the founding members of the so-called "deconstructivist" school of architecture—that the Guggenheim engaged to design its hundred million dollar outpost in Bilbao.

And of course it is *this* Frank Gehry who is shamelessly praised, flattered, extolled, and all but deified in *The New York Times Magazine* by the paper's chief architectural critic, Herbert Muschamp. Readers of the *Times* will remember Mr. Muschamp. He is the man who not so long ago compared a Calvin Klein advertisement for men's underwear in Times Square to Michelangelo's *David*. Now he is back, telling us that a twisted mass of titanium-clad steel plopped incongruously in the Basque foothills is an architectural and existential revelation, a "masterpiece," a "miracle," "a Lourdes for a crippled culture." Reaching for his most exalted terms of praise, he even tells us that the building is "the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe." ("Camp," Sontag observed, "is the triumph of the epicene style.")

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Considered simply as a work of prose, Mr. Muschamp's panting encomium to Frank Gehry's latest joke is probably the most egregious bit of writing we have yet encountered in the *Times*. To say that it is overwritten is like saying the Mir space station is a bit cranky. It is smarmy, mendacious, and self-indulgent, with a sugar content that will make diabetics tremble. Anyone attempting to wade through it is advised to stock up on Dramamine and airsickness bags. But what makes "The Miracle in Bilbao" significant as well as repulsive is the way that Mr. Muschamp blithely employs the most exalted critical vocabulary—a vocabulary once reserved for the greatest works of art—to describe, and to praise, what is clearly a post-postmodern exercise in architectural cynicism.

> What if American art has not, after all, played itself out to its last entropic wheeze? What if standards of cultural achievement have not irretrievably dissolved in the vast, tepid bath of relativity, telemarketing and manipulated public opinion? Has it even become possible, once again, to think about beauty as a form of truth?
>
> Ring-a-ding-ding.

In composing this love letter to Frank Gehry, Mr. Muschamp is paying homage more to a sensibility than a particular building. The "miracle" of the Bilbao Guggenheim, he tells us, is not the building itself but "the extravagant optimism that enters into the outlook of those who have made the pilgrimage" to see it. What can this mean? That Spain is a nice place to visit this time of year? No, for Mr. Muschamp Frank Gehry's latest concoction is an embodiment of the campy nihilism that likens underwear advertisements to sculptures by Michelangelo, that pretends that moral anarchy is really a form of enlightenment, and that views culture as an equal-opportunity playground in which everything is "a hoot and a holler" and "superficiality can be wonderful."

"What is a community?," Mr. Muschamp asks:

> A focus group, a concentration camp, a chat room on the Internet, an address book, a dance club, all those afflicted with a particular incurable disease, a gender, an age bracket, a waiting room, owners of silver BMWs, organized crime, everyone who swears by a particular brand of painkiller and a two-block stretch of Manhattan on any weekday at lunch hour.

Unpacking the moral, social, and political assumptions embedded in this inventory would take a good many words. For his part, Mr. Muschamp, believing that he has made a daring point about the amorphousness of contemporary life, tells us that "social fragmentation" is "one of the truths Frank Gehry has sought to explore in his work." What he does not see is that there is a big difference between *exploring* a pathology—which implies some measure of critical distance—and merely exhibiting it.

Mr. Muschamp's essay is littered with contradictions, non sequiturs, and portentous mannerisms. Describing the trip to Bilbao, he writes:

> Oh, and by the way, you might get blown up. Basque country is not Bosnia. But it's not Disney World, either. History here has not been sanitized into a colorful spectacle for your viewing enjoyment. People are actually living history here, punctuated by periodic violence. Those who visit Bilbao, however, may come away thinking that art is not entirely remote from matters of life and death.

Meaning . . . what? That people living in the United States are not "actually living history"? That Basque terrorism has something to do with one's view of art? That Frank Gehry's building has some special social or political significance because it happens to be in Bilbao?

In fact, Mr. Muschamp does seem to believe something of the sort. "Like the Basque region," he writes, "this building is a

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place of contested borders"—which is akin to saying, Like the Napa Valley region, this is a building of many grapes. In the end, however, for Mr. Muschamp everything seems to come back to a woman he glimpsed in Bilbao who reminded him of Marilyn Monroe:

> An art form that has long depended upon appeals to external authority—history, science, context, tradition, religion, philosophy or style—has at last come to the realization that nobody cares about that sort of thing anymore. Architecture has stepped off her pedestal. She's waiting for her date outside a bar on a rainy early evening in Bilbao, Spain.

Right. And what is architecture without an allegiance to "history, science, context, tradition, religion, philosophy or style"? (What, for that matter, is a "non-external" authority?) The work of Frank Gehry gives us a pretty good clue about what fully emancipated architecture looks like, but perhaps Mr. Muschamp comes even closer to the essential spirit of the thing when he observes that "what was once the radical outlook of Surrealism has become part of the logic of everyday life." No doubt this is true of everyday life at the *Times* these days. The problem, alas, is that both he and the once-great newspaper he writes for believe that this is cause for celebration.

From the archives of the academy:

Prospective applicants to the Cornell Ph.D. program in English occasionally write me to ask about the "type of student Cornell is looking for." . . .

A glance at the titles of dissertations completed in the past five years suggests why it's a difficult question to answer. Are we looking for the type of student who is interested in "George Eliot and the Victorian Discourses of Gender and Historiography" (Rohan Maitzen, now teaching at Dalhousie University) or in "Gender Magic: Desire, Romance, and the Feminine in Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight" (Geraldine Heng, University of Texas/Austin). . . .

Fascinating work has also been produced by . . . students who bring their training as readers and interpreters of literature to the study of visual media in dissertations such as "Rearranging the Furniture: The Apparatus of Subjectivity in 1950s Cinema" (Sabrina Barton, University of Texas at Austin) or "Reading by Half-Light: Cinematic Spectatorship in Modernist Women's Writing" (Rebecca Egger, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor). And Cornell has played a crucial part in producing a new generation of scholars in eighteenth-century and Restoration literature, with dissertations such as "Dangerous Publics: Literature, Culture-Consumption and Political Activism in the 1790s" (Andrew McCann, University of Queensland, Australia). . . .

In the past five years, our program has turned out specialists in minority literatures as well, with dissertations such as "Learning from Experience: Politics, Epistemology, and Chicana/o Identity" (Paula Moya, Stanford University) and "Bodies in Collision: African-American Fiction and the Sexual Politics of Narrative" (Terry Rowden, University of Colorado at Boulder).

From "Balancing the Demand and the Delight: Preparing the English Professional at Cornell," by Debra Fried, Director of Graduate Studies, in the September 1997 issue of *English at Cornell: A Newsletter from the Department of English*, page 6.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: II

A gospel of emancipation

by Roger Kimball

A nihilist program is a beautifully democratic approach to literature.
—Paul Goodman, *Utopian Essays*

The core of the heresy of the Free Spirit lay in the adept's attitude towards himself: he believed that he had attained a perfection so absolute that he was incapable of sin. Although the practical consequences of this belief could vary, one possible consequence was certainly antinomianism or the repudiation of moral norms. . . .

Disclaiming book-learning and theological subtleties, they rejoiced in direct knowledge of God—indeed, they felt themselves united with the divine essence in a most intimate union. And this in turn liberated them from all restraints. Every impulse was experienced as a divine command; now they could surround themselves with worldly possessions . . . now, too, they could lie or steal or fornicate without qualms of conscience. For since inwardly the soul was wholly absorbed into God, external acts were of no account.
—Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*

Looking back on it now, it seems peculiarly appropriate that the only real job that the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg ever had—for more than a few weeks, anyway—was in market research. He clearly had a tremendous gift in this direction. For although he later ridiculed his time on Madison Avenue ("We spent $150,000 to learn that most people didn't want furry teeth," he scoffed) —as indeed he ridiculed every other aspect of middle-class, bourgeois life—his own career as a poet and spiritual guru depended crucially on his talent as a tireless self-promoter. It was the one talent, in fact, that he indisputably possessed in great abundance.

Readers only vaguely familiar with Ginsberg's life and work will doubtless find this surprising. When he died at seventy of liver cancer last April, Allen Ginsberg was almost universally celebrated as a major literary figure—and one who, moreover, exercised a benign if sometimes "controversial" influence on the cultural and ethical life of his times. A smiling, sybaritic hippie, lost in clouds of incense and marijuana, chanting mantras, seducing young men, he disparaged the United States while preaching nonviolence and love, and taking off his clothes in public at every opportunity. It says a lot about our culture—or perhaps it is one more testimony to Ginsberg's marketing skills—that such a man should be exalted by the mainstream press as a beneficent or at least harmlessly amusing presence.

The few dissenting voices (which included a note in the May 1997 *New Criterion*) were drowned out in a chorus—one might say a "Howl," after Ginsberg's best known poem—of fulsome eulogy. *The New York Times*, for example, hailed Ginsberg as "the poet laureate of the Beat Generation," "one of America's most celebrated poets," whose "irrepressible personality . . . provided a bridge between the Underground

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and the Transcendental." An hour-long PBS television documentary that aired in September paraded a long list of luminaries, from Joan Baez to Norman Mailer, to extol his "courage," his literary and spiritual daring, and (a favorite epithet) his "gentleness." Not to be outdone, the well-known poetry critic and Harvard professor Helen Vendler writes in the September/October 1997 issue of *Harvard Magazine* about Ginsberg's "great gifts to world culture," "the moral base of his poetry," and her "own profound gratitude for his work and the life out of which it came." ("He allowed me my own rage, social criticism, and coarseness," she explained, no doubt correctly.)

Ginsberg's friend William S. Burroughs II, Beat novelist and sometime heroin addict, whose paternal grandfather invented the adding machine, got a similarly enthusiastic send-off when he died at eighty-three in August. No one spoke of his "gentleness," of course. "Gentleness" was definitely not part of Burroughs's reputation as the author of *Junkie*, *Naked Lunch*, and other surrealistic hymns to violence, drug abuse, and extreme sexual degradation. "Bill was never keen on the love-and-peace side of the sixties," one fan noted. "The only way I'd like to see a policeman given a flower," Burroughs sneered, "is in a flowerpot from a high window." Even so, a memorialist in *New York* magazine assured readers that, whatever his pathologies and fondness for guns, Burroughs was really "a sweet, funny, and lonely man. Just lovely." And naturally there were plenty of encomia to Burroughs's "courage," "candor," and "strange genius," his exalted place (in the words of *The Los Angeles Times*) as "a seminal figure of the Beat Generation." "Seminal," indeed: "He spent years experimenting with drugs as well as with sex," *The New York Times* cheerfully reported, "which he engaged in with men, women, and children."

The enthusiastic praise that Ginsberg and Burroughs elicited on the occasion of their deaths was not just valedictory piffle, white lies that surround the dead like a second shroud. During his lifetime, Ginsberg was showered with just about every literary award and honor it was possible to win, short of the Nobel Prize, including the National Book Award, election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, even, in 1993, the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres. This enemy of "materialism" and the corporate culture of "Amerika" had his eight-hundred-page *Collected Poems* published by Harper & Row (now HarperCollins), and received more than one million dollars for his "papers" from Stanford University. Burroughs, who lacked Ginsberg's charm and craving for publicity, did not prosper to the same extent. But he, too, lived to see himself lionized, both as an important literary figure and as a hero and role model for countless rock musicians, from The Beatles to David Bowie. Having begun as outlaws from the establishment, literary and otherwise, Ginsberg and Burroughs were taken up by a grateful academic establishment desperately in search of something to say. Innumerable papers, monographs, and dissertations have appeared to praise and interpret their works, and both men were the subject of fawning biographies in the early 1990s.

The third celebrated member of the Beat triumvirate, Jack Kerouac—the man who coined the phrase "Beat Generation" (and who, one is reminded again and again in the "literature," suggested the title of *Naked Lunch* to Burroughs)—managed to drink himself to death in 1969 at the age of forty-seven. Consequently, he missed out on a lot of what we might call the pre-posthumous adulation showered on his friends Ginsberg and Burroughs when the culture caught up with their radicalism in the 1970s. But Kerouac, too, was subsequently lionized by the establishment he once affected to scorn. Not only are all (or virtually all) his works still in print, but Viking recently honored him with a fat *Portable Jack Kerouac*, a tribute once reserved for genuinely accomplished writers. There is a scholarly edition of his letters from 1940–1956 (with

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no doubt more to come) and a special fortieth-anniversary reissue of Kerouac's most famous book, *On the Road*, first published in 1957. There are also the usual academic studies and at least one star-struck biography. His home city of Lowell, Massachusetts, even saw fit to name a new park after him in 1987.

About the Beats generally, an obituary for Burroughs in *The Washington Post* admirably summed up the current state of received opinion. The obituarist quotes from a book of Burroughs's dreams: "I attend a party and dinner at Columbia. Allen Ginsberg is there and rich. He has founded some sort of church." The obituarist comments: "This was no dream; this was reality. . . . [Today,] the church of the Beats is stronger than ever, unquestionably the most significant literary congregation in America since the Lost Generation of Hemingway and Fitzgerald."

Well, that is partly true. The Beats *were* tremendously significant, but chiefly in the way that they provided a preview in the 1950s of the cultural, intellectual, and moral disasters that would fully flower in the late 1960s. The ideas of the Beats, their sensibility, contained *in ovo* all the characteristics we think of as defining the cultural revolution of the Sixties and Seventies. The adolescent longing for liberation from conventional manners and intellectual standards; the polymorphous sexuality; the narcissism; the destructive absorption in drugs; the undercurrent of criminality; the irrationalism; the naïve political radicalism and anti-Americanism; the adulation of pop music as a kind of spiritual weapon; the Romantic elevation of art as an alternative to rather than as an illumination of normal reality; the pseudo-spirituality, especially the spurious infatuation with Eastern religions: in all this and more the Beats provided a vivid glimpse of what was to come.

The chief difference between the Beat Generation and the Sixties was the ambient cultural climate: when the Beats first emerged, in the mid-Fifties, the culture still offered some resistance to the poisonous antinomianism the Beats advocated. But by the time the Sixties established themselves, virtually all resistance had been broken down. It was then that the message of the Beats gained mass appeal. Reaction to the Vietnam War probably did more than anything to enfranchise their antinomianism, though the introduction of the birth-control pill certainly did a great deal to further the cause of the sexual revolution, a prime item on the agenda of the Beats. In short order, the unconventional became the established convention; the perverse was embraced as normal; the unspeakable was broadcast everywhere; the outrageous was met with enthusiastic applause.

In a word, establishment of the Beat "church" was significant as a chapter in the moral and cultural degradation of our society. Regarded as a *literary* phenomenon, however, what the Beats produced exists chiefly as a kind of artistic antimatter. It would not be quite right to say that its value is nil, for that might imply an innocuous neutrality. What the Beats have bequeathed us is *actively* bad, a corrupting as well as a corrupt phenomenon. Two things have kept what the Beats wrote in circulation: the academic maw with its insatiable appetite for verbal fodder of any kind, and the unhealthy craving for instances of psychopathology that the Beats not only exemplified but also helped to foster in their work and in their lives.

Of the Beat triumvirate, Kerouac was probably both the most pathetic and least noxious. Psychologically, he was a mess—as indeed were Ginsberg and Burroughs. But, unlike them, Kerouac lacked the knack of sanctifying his pathologies and inducing others to bow down in obeisance. The three met in 1944 when Ginsberg was a student at Columbia College. In 1945, they lived together, with a shifting cast of low-life friends, in an apartment leased by Joan Vollmer, a drug-addicted student at Columbia's School of Journalism whom Burroughs, despite his homosexuality, married.

Having explained that "it was not long

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after Bill's sixteenth birthday that he conducted his first experiments with mind altering drugs," Burroughs's biographer Barry Miles gives us a good sense of the Beat life on 115th Street. (Why is it that drug abuse is always described as an "experiment"?)

> Bill continued his experiments with drugs, joined by Allen, Jack, and Joan. Joan had developed a liking for benzedrine, which was easily available in nasal inhalers, and she quickly became addicted. Jack took so much that his health suffered; he became very run down and developed phlebitis in his legs. Ginsberg found that benzedrine made him write "stanzas of gibberish" and used it less than the others. . . .
>
> Bill's friend [Herbert] Huncke took to using the 115th Street apartment as a place for storing stolen goods, once even leaving a stolen car parked outside. Bill was shooting up quite openly in front of everyone.

Burroughs, who had graduated from Harvard a decade earlier, was in and out of jail, living a drug-sodden existence in New York on an allowance from his parents. As Miles explains, "$200 a month, . . . which in 1946 was plenty to live on, was not enough to feed his habit. Bill began helping Phil White roll drunks on the subway." Although not as susceptible to criminal machinations as Burroughs, this was Kerouac's world as well, just as it was Ginsberg's: the botched world of the an Ivy-leaguer flirting with the underworld from a position of privilege. Kerouac, too, had attended Columbia for a few semesters in the early 1940s, but dropped out in 1942. He enlisted in the Navy in 1943, was discharged for psychiatric reasons a few months later, and drifted back to New York. He was married three times: twice for a matter of months, the last time in 1966 when he was already lost in an alcoholic fog. He had a daughter by his second wife, but hysterically denied paternity and refused to pay a penny for child support until the child was ten years old (at which point the court ordered him to pay twelve dollars a week until the child was twenty-one). When not "on the road," he spent most of his adult life living with his mother.

Although predominantly heterosexual, Kerouac also had sex with Ginsberg and Burroughs (who in turn had sex with each other). For all of them, sex functioned chiefly as a prop to wounded narcissism. For Ginsberg and especially for Burroughs, this transformed sex into an obsessive, predatory activity in which an endless stream of "partners"—male or female, young or old—became little more than discardable accessories to masturbation and fantasies of absolute transcendence. Kerouac's insecurities hobbled this aspect of his narcissism, making him somewhat less promiscuous but also distinctly more helpless than his friends.

Kerouac famously wrote *On the Road* in less than three weeks on a single continuous roll of paper: 175,000 words in twenty days. In this he was abiding by the procedures he had outlined in his once-famous manifesto "The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1953). Two samples:

> LAG IN PROCEDURE. No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing.
>
> CENTER OF INTEREST. Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion—Do not afterthink except for poetic or P.S. reasons. Never afterthink to "improve" or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind—tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!—now!—your* way is your only way—"good"—or—"bad"—always honest, ("ludicrous"), spontaneous, "confessional" interesting, because not "crafted."

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It is possible that such stuff once seemed fresh. Nowadays, it reads as sub-Romantic adolescent nonsense, the kind of thing you *hope* high school teachers are busy discouraging. *On the Road*, too, is a period piece: it is the literary equivalent of the huge fins on a 1950s Cadillac, though not as impressive. Kerouac's flat "this-happened, then-this-happened, then-this-happened" prose is a caricature of Hemingwayesque precision: a barren rather than a pregnant sparseness.

> We drove to Terry's family shack. It was situated on the old road that ran between the vineyards. It was dark when we got there. They left me off a quarter-mile away and drove to the door. Light poured out of the door; Terry's six other brothers were playing their guitars and singing.

In short, an insomniac's dearest wish. Truman Capote had the last word on Kerouac's prose when he observed that "it isn't writing at all—it's typing."

It is impossible to look so kindly on Ginsberg's or Burroughs's literary work—or so indulgently on their lives. Significantly, the most famous work of both writers—Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959)—first came to public notice through the obscenity suits they provoked (which, like all court decisions that promote pornography, are invariably described as "landmark" by their partisans). As was seen clearly when the works first appeared, their primary claim is not literary but ethical or moral. More precisely, both issued a defiant challenge to prevailing moral standards, *Howl* in its glorification of drugs, madness, and promiscuous sex, *Naked Lunch* in its grisly depiction of depravity, sexual torture, and heroin-induced dementia. The challenge, alas, encountered no effective resistance. In one of the many flattering obituaries that appeared about Burroughs, a long-time associate is quoted as saying that "William Burroughs opened the door for supporters of freedom of expression." Obituaries of Ginsberg were full of similar testimony: the poet as crusader for free speech. In fact, both writers contributed heavily to the debasement of the debate over free speech by implicating it irrevocably in the defense of pornography. If they "opened the door" on anything, it was on the academic and social enfranchisement of pornography as a morally neutral matter of "lifestyle."

Most of Ginsberg's poetry is little better than doggerel. "Hūṃ Bom!" (1984) is typical.

> I
> Whom bomb?
> We bomb them!
> Whom bomb?
> We bomb them!
> Whom bomb?
> We bomb them!
> Whom bomb?
> We bomb them!
>
> Whom bomb?
> You bomb you!
> Whom bomb?
> You bomb you!

And so on, for two pages. Ginsberg's style is often praised as "Whitmanesque" by its fans, but that is a calumny upon Whitman. It is true that, like Whitman, Ginsberg makes abundant use of anaphora, repeating certain phrases again and again for rhetorical effect. But what was fresh and individual in 1855, when Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, seems, in Ginsberg's hands, mannered, pretentious, hectoring. There's much more wind than Whitman in Ginsberg's verse. In the breathless effervescence of *Song of Myself*, Whitman transformed megalomania into poetry: the merely personal is lost in an almost mystic apprehension of nature. In Ginsberg, the megalomania is always personal. His preachy verse lurches from the sickly sentimental, to the pornographic ("Sweet Boy Gimme Yr Ass"), to the politically tendentious ("Verses Written for Stu-

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dent Antidraft Registration Rally 1980"). There are several poems to drugs: "Mescaline," "Lysergic Acid," "A Methadrine Vision in Hollywood," etc., and lots of four-letter words and descriptions of sex acts.

"Kaddish" (1959), after "Howl" his best-known poem, is meant to be an elegy for his mother, who died in an asylum in 1956 shortly after Ginsberg authorized that she be given a lobotomy. Some people have claimed to find it moving. It is a long, shapeless, stream-of-consciousness rant in which Ginsberg settles various family scores and says a lot of disgusting things about his mother that, because of the "Whitmanesque" bad writing, are supposed to be touching.

"Howl," in addition to being Ginsberg's most famous poem, also epitomizes a central mendacity of the entire Beat enterprise. In essence, the poem is a paean to madness and drug abuse as the only really authentic responses to life in a repressive society: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix. . . ." Of course, far from being "the best minds" of his generation, "the angelheaded hipsters" whom Ginsberg saw destroyed, in the psychiatric institution where he was incarcerated for eight months in the late 1940s, or later when he became a prophet of psychedelia, were the unhappy misfits of a prosperous and overindulgent society. In romanticizing their madness, Ginsberg deliberately falsified their suffering. As the critic Norman Podhoretz observed in the August 1997 number of *Commentary* ("My War with Allen Ginsberg"), Ginsberg's suggestion that madness provides access to a higher reality is "heartless nonsense." "There was," Podhoretz notes, "something cruel about drafting such pitiable creatures into the service of an ideological aggression against the kind of normal life to which they would have given everything to return."

This glorification of madness, drug abuse, criminality, and excess is a defining current of the Beat sensibility. Burroughs's biographer Barry Miles tells us that all the Beats "shared a passionate desire to 'widen the area of consciousness,'" and cites their insatiable appetite for drugs as one evidence of this desire. In 1966, Ginsberg even testified before Congress about the "mind expanding" potential of psychedelics. In fact, as the philosopher Harvey Mansfield has observed in his essay "The Legacy of the Late Sixties," the idea that drugs are an aid to "mind expansion" is "an illusion so pathetic that one can hardly credit that it was once held." It is a prime example of what the historian Christopher Lasch once called "The Banality of Pseudo-Self-Awareness." The central appeal of drugs, as Mansfield noted, "is that of infinite power together with infinite desire." It is not an accident that a celebration of drugs went hand in hand with the sexual revolution and the tremendous upsurge in juvenile political radicalism. Here is Timothy Leary describing Ginsberg's reaction to a dose of psilocybin in 1960:

> Allen, completely naked except for his glasses, waved a finger in the air. "I'm the Messiah," he proclaimed. "I've come down to preach love to the world. We're going to walk through the streets and teach people to stop hating. . . . We'll call Kerouac on Long Island, and Kennedy and Khrushchev and Bill Burroughs in Paris and Norman Mailer. . . . We'll get them all hooked up in a big cosmic electronic love talk. War is just a hang-up."

"And then," Leary noted in a memoir, "we started planning the psychedelic revolution."

There is something highly comic in this preposterous spectacle, of course—especially in the prospect of calling on Norman Mailer to help with the envisioned love march. But there is nothing at all funny about the many shattered lives that the Beats' glorification of excess left in its wake. William Everson, a second-tier Beat propagandist and poet, has written that the rise of the Beats marked the "reemergence in the

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twentieth century of the Dionysian spirit." In a sense this is right. But it would be closer to the truth to say that the rise of the Beats marked the elevation of criminal irresponsibility in American society to a new position of romance and respectability. Who knows how many lives were blighted as a result of Ginsberg's proselytizing on behalf of drugs and promiscuous sex?

Burroughs's even creepier world, marked by paranoia and unrelieved sordidness, has left a number of individual casualties we know about quite well. It would be difficult to overstate the loathsomeness of Burroughs's opinions. Asked about Christianity, he said: "I'm violently anti-Christian. It was the worst disaster that ever occurred on a disaster-prone planet, the most virulent spiritual poison. . . . Fundamentalists are dangerous lunatics. There's really no place for them in an over-crowded life boat. They're a menace."

Burroughs apparently thought women were a menace, too. He once advised Peter Orlovsky, Ginsberg's boyfriend, to "take a tip from me, kid, and steer clear of 'em. They got poison dripping all over 'em." In an interview from 1969, Burroughs explained that "I think love is a virus. I think love is a con put down by the female sex. I don't think it's a solution to anything. . . . I think they [women] were a basic mistake, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error." Ginsberg recalled that Burroughs, in a fit of paranoia, believed that women were extraterrestrial agents and that "maybe you had to exterminate all the women, or get rid of them one way or another. Evolve some sort of male that could give birth by parthenogenesis."

Barry Miles claims that Burroughs later "modified" his feelings about women. Perhaps he did. In any event, in 1951 Burroughs was living in Mexico with his wife, Joan, and the young son he had fathered. Unable to procure her favorite amphetamines, Joan was drinking a quart of tequila a day—which, Burroughs's biographer tells us, cost four cents, "the cost of a boy," whose services Burroughs's availed himself of regularly. Burroughs's drug of choice at the time seems to have been yage (a hallucinogen that Ginsberg indulged in frequently as well). He was also drinking heavily. One afternoon, he and Joan were very drunk at a friend's apartment. "Bill opened his travel bag," Miles recounts in his biography, "and pulled out the gun." Burroughs then said,

> "It's about time for our William Tell act. Put a glass on your head." They had never performed a William Tell act before but Joan, who was also very drunk, laughed and balanced a six-ounce water glass on her head. Bill fired. Joan slumped in her chair and the glass fell to the floor, undamaged. The bullet had entered Joan's brain at the temple. She was pronounced dead on arrival at Red Cross Hospital.

Burroughs jumped bail and fled Mexico rather than stand trial. He later said that it was his wife's death that made him a writer, forcing him into "a lifelong struggle, in which I have no choice except to write myself out." Another choice might have been to lead a responsible life and take care of the son he had fathered and the daughter he had inherited from his wife's previous marriage. But Burroughs abandoned them both to other family members. His son survived until 1981, when he finally managed to drink himself to death at the age of thirty-three. Burroughs claimed to have felt badly about that, too.

There is not much to be said about Burroughs's writing. It consists of semiliterate ravings by a very sick mind, a kaleidoscope of surrealistic depictions of drug-taking and sex. One of Burroughs's favorite scenarios was to picture young boys being simultaneously hanged and sodomized. Nevertheless, great claims have been made for Burroughs's writing, particularly *Naked Lunch*. One academic essay compares Burroughs's book with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "the sex and sadism," this writer tells us, "springs not from the diseased mind's explosion into a chaos of violence and obscenity but from the major

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conventions of a literary *genre* and from the world-view suggested by the procedures of philosophical analysis and implied in the early work of Wittgenstein." Only slightly less ridiculous was the claim made by the critic and novelist Mary McCarthy in 1963 that there were "many points of comparison" between Jonathan Swift and Burroughs, and that, "like a classical satirist, Burroughs is dead serious—a reformer." McCarthy was wrong. Burroughs was not a reformer. Unlike Swift, he had no ideal to oppose to the degradation his books depicted. On the contrary, he was a cynical opportunist who realized that calling his work "satire" could help exempt it from legal action.

One of the most remarkable things about the Beat Generation was the extent to which its spokesmen managed to con a gullible public into accepting their publicity. They told the world that they were rebelling against a drab, repressive society, and the world believed them. In fact, when the Beats hove into view, in the late Forties and early Fifties, American society was vibrantly alive. In the aftermath of World War II, it was confident, prosperous, and dynamic, helping to rebuild a shattered Europe and rising to contain the newly militant Soviet threat. Notwithstanding the distraction of Senator McCarthy and his hearings, domestic life in the United States had never offered young people more real freedom, economically, socially, or intellectually. Universities were newly galvanized and cultural life was marked by a seriousness of purpose and level of accomplishment that have never been regained.

The Beats disparaged all this, preferring fantasies of absolute liberation to the real freedoms that surrounded them. Like the medieval heretics Norman Cohn wrote about in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the Beats cultivated an extreme narcissism that bordered on self-deification and that "liberated them from all restraints" and allowed them to experience every impulse as "a divine command." What Norman Podhoretz observed of Ginsberg was also true of the Beats generally: they "conjured up a world of complete freedom from the limits imposed by [bourgeois] responsibilities." Podhoretz added, "It was a world that promised endless erotic possibility together with the excitements of an expanded consciousness constantly open to new dimensions of being: more adventure, more sex, more intensity, more *life*." Alas, the promise was illusory. Instead of an "expanded consciousness," the Beats purchased madness, ruination, and, for many, an early death. Their attack on bourgeois responsibility led not to greater freedom but to greater chaos. The erotic paradise they envisioned turned out to be rife with misery.

In a memorable image, Immanuel Kant spoke of a dove that, soaring above the ground and feeling the resistance of the air, imagines that "its flight would be easier still in empty space." The dream of absolute fulfillment cultivated by the Beats is just as illusory and just as dangerous. The Beats, like their successors in the Sixties, have often been described as "idealists." But fantasies of total gratification are not the product of idealism. They arise from a narcissism that, finding the world unequal to its desires, retreats into a realm of heedless self-absorption. Modesty, convention, and self-restraint then appear as the enemies rather than as the allies of humanity. In this sense, the Beat Generation marks a step back from civilization itself. As Walter Bagehot noted many years ago, savages prefer "short spasms of greedy pleasure to mild and equable enjoyment." Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac were all on the side of the savage. That their existential heresy was not only perpetuated but mythologized and spread abroad as a gospel of emancipation is something for which we have the Sixties to thank—or to blame. The Beats did a remarkable job of marketing their perversions and self-indulgences. But just as America's cultural revolution drew on the example of the Beats to propagate its radical antinomianism, so the Beats required the Sixties to complete their own apotheosis.

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Abstraction & utopia, II

by Hilton Kramer

Abstraction & revolution

Utopias are an expression of aspirations that cannot be realized, of efforts that are not equal to the resistance they encounter.
—Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star* (1908)

A revolution strengthens the impulse of invention. That is why there is a flourishing of art following a revolution. . . . Invention is always the working out of impulses and desires of the collective and not of the individual.
—Vladimir Tatlin, *International Iskusstv* (1919)

The reality principle—la force des choses—*will, in the end, always prevail over utopian passions.*
—Irving Kristol, "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals" (1979)

The fate of abstract art in Russia in the decade following the Revolution of 1917 proved to be one of the most tragic chapters in the annals of twentieth-century modernism. Its only near rival among the political calamities that beset the modernist movement in the early decades of the century occurred in Germany in the 1930s with the unleashing of Hitler's war on "degenerate" art. There was this important difference, however, between the Nazi campaign to abolish modernist art in Germany and that of the Soviet Union under Lenin. Hitler never pretended to set up as a patron of modernist art. However grudgingly, Lenin—or the regime over which he presided as dictator, anyway—did so pretend for a very short but crucial period, thus inducing the illusion among members of the Russian avant-garde that modernism in the arts would be embraced by the Bolsheviks as a privileged coefficient of their political revolution.

The fragility of this ill-fated misalliance between modernist art and political revolution was signaled by the fact that the Bolshevik loyalist to whom Lenin entrusted authority over the arts in the early years of the Soviet regime—Anatoly Lunacharsky, named People's Commissar for Public Enlightenment in 1917—was not himself exactly an enthusiast for avant-garde art. He was, to be sure, far more closely acquainted with the modernist movement than Lenin and far more tolerant of its innovations, having come to know some of the émigré Russian modernist painters in Paris before the First World War. Yet, while not as paranoid about the avant-garde as Lenin, who regarded it—not wholly incorrectly, alas—as a refuge for "escapees from the bourgeois intelligentsia," Lunacharsky clearly harbored serious doubts about the modernists he officially supported. To direct the Visual Arts Section of Narkkompros, the huge bureaucracy in his charge, Lunacharsky appointed not one of the militant advocates of Russian abstraction but David Shterenberg, a modernist painter he had met in Paris who was more amenable to

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welcoming a broader range of artistic loyalties than was common among the doctrinaire abstractionists. (Shterenberg, though a supporter of the Revolution, was not himself a Bolshevik.) Lunacharsky also named Marc Chagall, another of the modernist painters he got to know in Paris, as Commissar of Art in the artist's home town of Vitebsk. Abstract art, which in retrospect remains the most significant achievement of the Soviet avant-garde in this period, was never a branch of cultural life to which either Lunacharsky or his comrades in the Bolshevik hierarchy felt any personal or ideological commitment. On the contrary, abstraction was often under attack in the official Soviet press as a development inimical to the goals of proletarian culture even while the abstractionists enjoyed the official support of Lunacharsky's bureaucracy.

From the outset, then, the relation that obtained between an avant-garde that made an orthodoxy of abstraction and the firebrands of what, in the period from 1917 to 1921, was called War Communism, was highly problematic. Within the ranks of the dedicated abstractionists, moreover, loyalty to the Bolshevik regime was similarly riddled with doubt and suspicion. Vasily Kandinsky, the most accomplished of the abstract painters to enjoy official support, was never a true believer in the Revolution. Forced by the outbreak of the World War to leave Germany for his native Russia, where he was living when the Revolution erupted, Kandinsky married the daughter of a Russian general, and in 1922, having correctly perceived that the avant-garde would have no future in the Soviet Union, he decamped for the Bauhaus in Weimar.

Artistically, however, Kandinsky's period of repatriation in Russia brought a major change in his work. Under the influence of Malevich and his Suprematist circle, Kandinsky abandoned the painterly expressionist manner that had marked his first abstract paintings for the geometric and other hardedge forms now favored by the Russian abstractionists. Indeed, he became enough of a militant in his pursuit of this newly adopted pictorial orthodoxy to join Malevich in ousting Chagall from his official post in Vitebsk on the grounds that the latter's work was insufficiently abstract—and thus, in the minds of the abstractionist militants, insufficiently revolutionary. In 1921, a disillusioned Chagall departed once again for Paris, where he had made his first reputation as a member of the European avant-garde before the Revolution. He thus preceded Kandinsky into permanent exile in Western Europe by a year. Whatever differences divided Kandinsky and Chagall in the realm of pictorial aesthetics, they turned out to be very much alike in rejecting the political control of art that was already in progress in the Soviet Union.

Another prominent defector from the Soviet avant-garde was the sculptor Naum Gabo (1890–1978), who left Russia for Germany the same year as Kandinsky. Gabo was one of the pioneers of the kind of open-form abstract sculpture that, somewhat confusingly, has come to be called Constructivist. What lends confusion to the term in relation to sculpture like Gabo's is that while the latter is literally a construction of thin, sheetlike materials—first painted cardboard, then wood and metal and transparent plastics—that are cut and joined to shape three dimensional "volumes" consisting of space rather than mass, Constructivism as a movement in the Soviet avant-garde represented a philosophy of art diametrically opposed to Gabo's. Gabo regarded his constructions as works of art conceived in a spirit that reflected new scientific thinking about space and matter. This was why he called his constructed sculptures "Realist" rather than Constructivist. For, in the Soviet context, Constructivism was one of the names given to a movement that repudiated fine art—art that was now stigmatized as mere "speculative activity"—in favor of the kind of functionalist art that was more explicitly designed to serve the practical and propaganda interests of the Revolution: posters, photography,

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book illustration, even the design of clothing, tableware, and furniture. It was mainly in the West that sculptures like Gabo's came to be called Constructivist, and Gabo himself eventually accepted the name when he came to live first in England and then in the United States.

What adds still another layer of confusion to the issue is the fact that many of the leading advocates of Constructivism in the Soviet Union—Tatlin, Rodchenko, and Lissitzky, among them—first distinguished themselves as votaries of abstractionist fine art. Then, to advance the cause of Constructivist applied art, they adapted the formal vocabularies they had themselves invented for their fine-art abstraction to the design of useful objects, while at the same time declaring in the absolutist political spirit of the time that the fine arts, as traditionally conceived, must now be permanently rejected as a useless and harmful relic of a reactionary bourgeois culture. In a manifesto written in May 1921, Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), one of the most gifted abstract artists of his generation, thus repudiated all of his past artistic accomplishments when he announced that "up to now we did not see this simple thing called life, we did not know that it was so simple, clear, which has to be organized and purged of all kinds of adornment."

Having succeeded in purging painting and sculpture of everything but their most minimal abstract forms, Rodchenko and his Constructivist cohorts then undertook the much larger task of redesigning the objects of daily life for the Soviet masses along similarly minimalist lines. This was yet another utopian endeavor bound to fail—and fail it largely did in a very short time. Whatever small success this Constructivist initiative could make claim to was largely confined to the VKhUTEMAS, the government-sponsored design workshops where revolutionary theory enjoyed a distinct priority over the actual production of makable objects. This is one of the reasons, incidentally, why theory-obsessed academics in our own day feel such a strong affinity for the failed experiments of the Soviet Constructivists: they exist mainly in the realm of theory.

Given the conditions of Soviet society in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution of 1917, it was the very nature of the Constructivist enterprise that doomed it to failure. For one thing, the Bolshevik commissars on whose support these experiments in modernist design depended were, if anything, even more philistine in their aesthetic tastes than the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie the Constructivists scorned. Then, too, the faltering Soviet economy was simply not equipped to produce most of the projects that were proposed. As a consequence, most of these projects remained on the drawing board. And needless to say, the Russian masses weren't exactly clamoring for modernist design, and it certainly wasn't in order to drink out of Suprematist teacups or buy their daily copies of *Izvestia* at a Constructivist kiosk that the Bolsheviks had fought a bloody civil war.

The ultimate historical irony of the whole Constructivist misadventure is that what survives of its endeavors—Rodchenko's brilliant photographs, Popova's extraordinary textile designs, and Alexandra Exter's sets and costumes for certain theatrical productions—are now admired for precisely the aesthetic, which is to say, the formal, ideas they embody rather than for the political motives that prompted their creation. What also needs to be noted about this failed utopian venture is the role it played in terminating one of the most remarkable chapters in the entire history of abstract art. Years before Stalin was in a position to demonize abstraction as "bourgeois formalism," the campaign to condemn the creation of abstract painting and sculpture as a cultural activity politically at odds with the goals of the Revolution and thereby to render abstraction officially insupportable was initiated from within the ranks of the Soviet avant-garde itself. Stalin only codified and criminalized what Constructivist militants like Tatlin and Rodchenko had

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first proposed in rejecting abstract art, and then promptly condemned Constructivism as well.

Abstraction & the Bauhaus

"Art and Technology, a New Unity" is the slogan on our Bauhaus poster at the railroad station. Oh dear, will there really be no more art than the technology necessary to become profitable from now on? Since times are bad, art has to give in, and authority is granted it by associating with usable things—a hateful conception.
—Lyonel Feininger to Julia Feininger, 1923

Our aims are becoming more and more clear and have been expressed very precisely in an article by Moholy. They go against my grain in every respect, distress me terribly. What has been "art" for ages is to be discarded—to be replaced by new ideals. There is talk only about optics, mechanics and moving pictures. . . . Klee was very depressed yesterday when we talked about Moholy. He called it the "prefabricated spirit of the time."
—Lyonel Feininger to Julia Feininger, 1925

The concepts of mechanics, dynamics, statics and kinetics, the problem of stability, of balance, were examined in terms of three-dimensional forms and the relationship between materials was investigated as were methods of construction and montage. . . . Today's sculptor knows scarcely anything about the new fields in which the engineer works.
—László Moholy-Nagy, 1928

It took quite a while to get under way the kind of work which later made the Bauhaus a leader in designing for the lighting fixture industry.
—László Moholy-Nagy, 1938

It is one of the paradoxes of the legend of the Bauhaus, which the German architect Walter Gropius founded in Weimar in 1919 to reform and revitalize modern architectural practice, that it is often thought to have been one of the principal citadels of abstract art in Europe in the 1920s. The fact is, however, that no instruction in abstract painting—or, indeed, painting itself—was permitted at the Bauhaus until the last five years of its fourteen-year existence, and even then it was accorded a very low priority. Gropius disliked easel drawing, and his aversion to it was shared by Mies van der Rohe, who presided over the school in its final years. Traditional instruction in drawing and painting was never part of the Bauhaus curriculum.

The legend of the Bauhaus as a citadel of abstraction nonetheless persisted because a number of distinguished artists who have passed into history as masters of abstract art—Kandinsky, Klee, Albers, and Moholy-Nagy—were among the best-known members of the Bauhaus faculty. Then, too, an even larger number of lesser painters who had been students at the Bauhaus in the 1920s went on to acquire reputations as abstract artists working in what came to be recognized as a Bauhaus style. Most important of all was the fact that the basic course of instruction at the Bauhaus was designed to comprehend the entire range of visual experience in ways that eliminated from consideration all but its most universal and axiomatic attributes. As a consequence, abstraction of a certain kind—geometrical, Constructivist, and depersonalized—came to look as if it had been conceived to illustrate the theoretical principles of Bauhaus pedagogy.

The *Vorkurs*, or required preliminary course at the Bauhaus, was concentrated on theories of form and perception, on the one hand, and on the nature of materials, on the other, as a preparation for training in crafts and design. "What made the Bauhaus preliminary course . . . unique," writes Frank Whitford, "was the amount and quality of its theoretical teaching, the intellectual rigor with which it examined the essentials of visual experience and artistic creativity." What this meant in practice may be seen in a passage from an essay written in 1916 by the Austrian artist Johannes Itten, who three years later was brought to Weimar to create the original *Vorkurs* for the Bauhaus:

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> The clear geometric form is the one most easily comprehended and its basic elements are the circle, the square and the triangle. Every possible form lies dormant in these formal elements. They are visible to him who sees, invisible to him who does not.
>
> Form is also color. Without color there is no form. Form and color are one. The colors of the spectrum are those most easily comprehended. Every possible color lies dormant in them. Visible to him who sees—invisible to him who does not. . . .
>
> Geometric forms and the colors of the spectrum are the simplest, most sensitive forms and colors and therefore the most precise means of expression in a work of art.

By the time Itten arrived at the Bauhaus in 1919 to set up its *Vorkurs*, such ideas were already well-established in the De Stijl group in the Netherlands and the Suprematist circle in Russia, and in fact both De Stijl and Suprematism were to exert a profound influence on Bauhaus theory and practice as well as its disposition to think of both in utopian terms. It was certainly not the purpose of the *Vorkurs* to prepare its students for careers as abstract artists. Its goal was to prepare students for a much more ambitious task: the application of such theories of abstraction to a redesign of the entire manmade universe. In this respect, Bauhaus pedagogy had much in common with that of the VKHUTAMAS in the Soviet Union, especially after 1923 when the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) was appointed to replace Itten as director of the preliminary course.

Itten, who was more of a mystic than a political ideologue, had derived some of his ideas about color and form from Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1912. (It was to teach in Itten's version of the *Vorkurs*, to which his own ideas had already contributed a good deal, that Kandinsky was invited to join the Bauhaus in 1922.) Spiritual matters were not of compelling interest to Moholy, however. In politics he was a radical who had supported Bela Kun's short-lived Soviet in his native Hungary in 1919, and was still identifying himself as a Communist in the early 1920s. As a radical he was inevitably drawn both to the *révolté* art and politics of the Dadaists and to the authoritarian absolutism of the Russian Constructivists. (Whatever differences may have divided Dada from Constructivism, both had formed an alliance against the despised bourgeoisie.) In some respects, Moholy took the Bauhaus's commitment to socialism more seriously than Gropius himself—though Gropius had been a supporter of the ill-fated German revolution in 1919 and designed a Monument to the Fallen of the March Insurrection in 1920–21.

What Moholy's arrival at the Bauhaus signified was a change in the atmosphere as well as the ideas that would now govern the Bauhaus. "Even Moholy's appearance," writes Frank Whitford, "proclaimed his artistic sympathies"—and his political sympathies, too, as Whitford's further account makes clear.

> Itten had worn something like a monk's habit and had kept his head immaculately shaved with the intention of creating an aura of spirituality and communion with the transcendental. Moholy sported the kind of overall worn by workers in modern industry, His nickel-rimmed spectacles contributed further to an image of sobriety and calculation belonging to a man mistrustful of the emotions, more at home among machines than human beings. His dress stamped him as a Constructivist, as a follower to Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky, who rejected all subjective definitions of art and were scornful of the idea of the artist as the inspired maker of unique objects stamped by his personality.

Like Rodchenko, to whose example he was also strongly drawn, Moholy was a man of remarkably versatile talents, excelling as a painter, photographer, graphic designer, product designer, sculptor, and visual theorist. Unlike Rodchenko and the Soviet militants, however, he was not prepared to reject the art of painting in order to con-

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centrate exclusively on the applied arts. Nor, for that matter, did his radical sympathies prevent him from allying himself with capitalist industry in the realm of the applied arts. In this respect, Moholy's career —first in Germany, and then in America, where he later founded the so-called New Bauhaus in 1937—marked the demise of the utopianism which had prompted the creation of the Bauhaus as the "Cathedral of Socialism" in the immediate aftermath of Germany's defeat in the First World War. The hope of redesigning the man-made universe did not entirely fail, to be sure, but whatever successes were realized proved to be peculiarly dependent upon the least utopian of all economic and social systems: capitalism. It was as a handmaiden to capitalist enterprise and corporate competition in the marketplace that many of the Bauhaus's modernist design ideas enjoyed their greatest prosperity and influence. It was a happier fate than that suffered by modernism in the Soviet Union under Stalin, but it was no less a refutation of the utopianism to which the founders of the Bauhaus had initially aspired.

All utopian endeavors derive their moral force from a firm belief in the perfectibility of man. It was one of the purposes of the original *Vorkurs* at the Bauhaus to achieve this radical transformation of the human species by, in effect, creating the conditions for a radical revision of human consciousness. The late Reyner Banham put it very well when, in a discussion of the *Vorkurs* in *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), he cited "the determination to cleanse every incoming student's mind of all preconceptions and to put him, so to speak, back into Kindergarten to start again from scratch" as one of the defining innovations of the Bauhaus preliminary course. This, as Banham further observed, was clearly designed

> to return incoming students to the noble savagery of childhood. To have gone so far against established precedent without moving forward into a mechanized culture, meant that Itten had to go right outside the general body of Western, rational thought and under his influence Bauhaus students involved themselves in the study of mediaeval mystics like Eckhart, and Eastern spiritual discipline such as Mazdaznan, Tao and Zen.

Thus the socialist utopianism to which the Bauhaus dedicated its fortunes at the outset contained a large admixture of occult belief that was not to be exorcised until the arrival of Moholy, a man "more at home among machines than human beings." Under the guidance of this radical materialist, it was no longer the perfectibility of man that occupied the Bauhaus agenda but the perfectibility of machines, and that effectively closed the book on the utopian aspiration.

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Rediscovering the "espírito" of Machado

by Lauren Weiner

The radical intellectuals of nineteenth-century Latin America, heirs of the independence movement that began in 1811, set themselves the task of exposing the corruptions of empire in their pamphlets and their poetry. But the South American we should consider the true declarer of intellectual independence from the Old World—the true Simón Bolívar of letters, if you will—was no radical. The Brazilian Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908), monarchist and votary of the decidedly unrevolutionary-sounding French literary movement called Parnassianism, offered in fact the most iconoclastic account of the ideas and institutions—even the personality traits—which his countrymen inherited from Europe.

Machado was bent on exploring every kind of self-delusion of which the male ego—epitomized by the Latin ego—was capable. Of his nine novels and several dozen short stories, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881), *Quincas Borba* (1891), *Dom Casmurro* (1899), and "The Psychiatrist" (1881) stand as his acknowledged master works.[1] All deliver penetrating satire with an economy and a lightness of touch that commentators have come to refer to as "Machadian." This tone represents a kind of perfection of calibration—Machado's ability to draw near enough to people to sympathize with them, while still keeping an amused distance, knows few equals in literature. Looking down from Parnassus, he is cool but seldom cold. Like his contemporary Henry James and the aristocratic epigone Giuseppe di Lampedusa, Machado is skeptical of efforts to reform the human race. But the Brazilian writer, much as the American and the Italian, eschews the blasé attitude one finds in many a refined conservative, an attitude that proclaims: since I know that what is cannot be changed, I will affect to be bored by it. Machado is passionately interested in the welfare of his fellow sinners. We expect sin and folly from his characters, but he is able to surprise us with the shapes that sin and folly can take in human lives.

Though he rejected modern psychology, Machado was a crack psychologist, employing well before Freud ideas such as sublimation and displacement, and suggesting well before Pirandello that a person's societal roles were capable of swallowing up his individuality. He was a strong critic of Catholicism, finding in it the tricks of conscience-salving that prop up people's good opinion of themselves no matter their failures of honor or moral courage. And yet he was, at the same time, a man of the old school who held that to look down on the faithful merely because they believed was to

1 New editions of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, translated by Gregory Rabassa (219 pages, $25), and *Dom Casmurro*, translated by John Gledson (230 pages, $25), are forthcoming this month from Oxford University Press.

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court a major human failing, that of arrogance.

Machado's first novels and stories were those of a devotee of Romanticism. The dramatic framework that he devised early on—and stuck to in most of his novels, playing with it to highly original effect—pitted two types against one another: the cagey cynic versus the ineffectual romantic. In an essay from 1861, "Women's Preference for *Tolos*," he dubs the antiromantic, opportunistic, and virile man who carries off worldly prizes and beautiful women the *tolo* or "vulgar man." The sensitive dreamer who acts honorably, and therefore loves and loses, is called the *homem de espírito* or "ethereal man," with *espírito* meaning both "spirit" and "mind." Thus the Byronic hero is redrawn a bit by Machado: the fertile imagination is intact, but the sexual verve has been given to the philistine *tolo*.

In the early fiction, Machado sides more or less openly with the "ethereal man" in his contest against the "vulgar man." In at least one case—that of the impoverished, dark-skinned law student in *The Hand and the Glove* (1874), who swoons over an unattainable gentlewoman—the *homem de espírito* appears to be very much like the author himself. Interestingly, only after Machado begins having the "ethereal man" tell his own tale is he no longer a virtual stand-in for the author. Machado's all-important technical shift from an omniscient to a first-person narrator after 1879 represents quite an unusual situation, for it reverses what we may take to be the natural developmental path of the fiction writer. Many an ordinary storyteller starts with "I" and hopes to graduate someday to the greater impartiality of "he" or "she." Not Machado. The goal of modern literature—at least as T. S. Eliot defined it—was to make subjectivity objective. Machado comes closer to achieving this goal than most, ascending his artistic Parnassus by use of the first person.

According to a biographical sketch by the translator Thomas Colchie, Machado was the son of a mulatto house painter and Portuguese washerwoman from the Azores. A widow of great wealth and political stature took the couple on as dependents at her estate in Rio de Janeiro, and took a special interest in educating their epileptic and undersized son, Joaquim. He began to publish poetry, fiction, and journalism while working as a cashier for a publishing house and bookstore. Machado's rise from obscurity to a lasting (if underacknowledged) place in Latin American literature represents no miraculous overcoming of social obstacles, according to the Brazilian critic Antonio Candido. Candido, in his recently republished essay on Machado, wrote that "racially mixed people of humble origin were among the representative men of our liberal Empire, men who, though being of his color and having begun poor, ended by receiving titles of nobility and carrying ministerial portfolios. Let us not exaggerate, therefore, the theme of genius versus fate."[2] Machado helped his fate along by persuading the sister of one of his upper-crust literary friends to defy her family and marry him. He obtained a minor ministerial appointment, and along with it the opportunity to produce stories, plays, criticism, and novels as a gentleman-scholar rather than as a starving bohemian.

Colchie and others describe the writer's wife, the Portuguese Carolina Augusta Xavier de Novais, as a mentor to Machado. She put before him the Portuguese classics and Shakespeare, Stendhal, and Laurence Sterne. Apparently on the strength of this reading, he began, after a kind of artistic, emotional, and physical breakdown in 1879, to reject Romanticism as a spent force. Yet he also found distasteful the naturalism then arriving on the scene. Reviewing a novel by the Portuguese naturalist Eça de Queirós, he wrote that naturalism was a "servile photographic reproduction of the petty and the ignoble." In his post-1879 writings, he

2 See "An Outline of Machado de Assis" (1970) in *Antonio Candido, On Literature and Society*, translated by Howard S. Becker (Princeton University Press, 1995).

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would chart his own course. He would toy, Sterne-like, with the conventions of story-telling while staying largely within the subject matter of the novel of manners.

The flowering of Machado's genius came immediately after his 1879 crisis, with *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, his earliest novel written in the first person. (Susan Sontag, in her foreword to William L. Grossman's 1990 translation of the novel as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, called Grossman's a "rather interfering title," and so it is. The current Oxford edition uses a literal translation of the title from the Portuguese.) While it is true that most first-person narrators narrate with the wisdom-giving benefits of retrospection, Machado's invention of a defunct first-person narrator ups the ante quite a bit. With Brás Cubas, Machado both makes fun of the tale-teller's traditional claim to disinterestedness, and enters Brás into competition as the most disinterested tale-teller of them all. For who could be more detached than a voice from beyond the grave?

Brás Cubas moves quickly from one subject to another (chapter breaks appear every page or two, with headings such as "Sad, but Short" and "Short, but Happy"), and this skipping around establishes a peculiar archness of tone. During his life (he tells us he died in 1869), Brás had been a foppish member of the idle rich, a "faithful compendium," as he puts it, "of triviality and presumption." He was also, though extremely good looking, a hapless *homem de espírito* when it came to women. In this "memoir," as in Machado's early works, the *homem de espírito* is humiliated by coquettes and by *tolos*. But because Brás Cubas is less noble than his predecessors he is more capable of striking back. The *tolo* of the piece is Damião Lobo Neves, who has come on the political scene "with the breathless impetus of a Caesar." Lobo Neves has stolen from Brás Cubas the pretty young bride and the parliamentary seat which Brás's father intended that he should have. So, Brás cuckolds him. Lobo Neves is at first unaware of it, thinking Brás is his best friend, and after the affair becomes the subject of drawing room speculation, he pretends that nothing is amiss to avoid losing face with the social and political elite. (Even Tolstoy's desiccated Karenin turns out to have more *cojones* than the supposed he-man, Lobo Neves.) The hypocrisy of European-derived sexual mores is a frequent target of Machado. As a line from *Quincas Borba* has it, "The greatest sin, after the initial sin, is its publication."

In being given some delicious victories that had been denied to the soft romantics of the early fiction, Brás Cubas enacts a "revenge of the nerds" from which authorial wish fulfillment is not entirely absent. However, this self-serving aspect is outweighed by the fact that the narrator scrutinizes himself as witheringly as he does everyone else. In the Machadian world, every man is to some degree a deluded Don Quixote, to be neutralized by those around him with polite listening punctuated, when necessary, by lying compliments. Brás is devilishly adept at humoring the self-absorbed Lobo Neves and others in the book. To our delight, he does not omit a recounting of those times in his life when he was humored and flattered in his turn.

He describes having tried to cut a figure in the political world. His major effort in the Chamber of Deputies is a speech urging his fellow legislators to lower the height of the hats worn by the National Guard. The guardsmen wear shakos, those stiff, cylindrical military dress hats with metal plates and plumes, the heft of which causes fainting spells in the tropical heat during parade drills. Brás Cubas, would-be reformer of the "unhygienic" shako, tells us with an implied chuckle that his speech "was variously received. As to form, eloquence, literary quality, and philosophical implications, there was only one opinion: everyone told me that in these respects it was perfect and that no one else had ever succeeded in deriving so many thoughts from a shako."

Brás's self-critique turns sterner—though

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it still carries that drollness of tone—when it comes to his private behavior. He weighs the frivolousness and female vanity of his paramour, Virgília Lobo Neves, against his own sexual jealousy and selfishness, and his faults push down far more heavily on the moral scales. He reports avoiding her when she needed him most, "afraid that I would then have to share the responsibility for the solution" to the crisis created by the love triangle. The ebb and flow of rationalizations is lifelike, and utterly damning. Brás tells about the time he hid behind a bedroom door to avoid discovery by Lobo Neves; the passage becomes a discourse on how to convince oneself that such behavior in no way affects one's personal dignity.

Both of the Machadian types, the *tolo* and the *homem de espírito*, turn out to be pretty cowardly. Those with courage in Machado's fiction turn out to be women—namely, those women who form love triangles with rivalrous "vulgar men" and "ethereal men." (Machado's proper Catholic females, who would never get involved in sexual intrigues, are often a bore.) Because female activity without female notoriety is a Protestant and an Anglo-Saxon invention, Machado is unfamiliar with spirited women who are not Jezebels. And yet with Capitu, the childhood sweetheart in *Dom Casmurro*, he gropes toward a full-bodied female character who is neither one of the "girls of easy virtue" nor one of the uninteresting well-behaved. Where, exactly, she falls in the moral spectrum we are never quite sure. Capitu (short for Capitolina) may be Machado's crowning achievement as a novelist. She practically gets up and walks off the page, so vividly is she drawn, and the question of whether or not she has remained loyal to her husband gives *Dom Casmurro* a rare suspensefulness and mystery. Bento Santiago, an *homem de espírito* who narrates the novel from the conventional position of disillusioned old age, lovingly describes his playmate, co-conspirator, and eventual wife, without whom he would not have been able to thwart his mother's plan to have him enter the priesthood. Capitu's shrewd strategizing and self-restraint, exercised over a period of several years, rescue Bento for love and for marriage. When a lack of children emerges as the marital problem of this loving couple, the novel's driving question becomes, does Capitu's resourcefulness take in a willingness to commit adultery?

The will to reproduce, and an equally strong will to control the destiny of the progeny, are major themes in Machado. Adults look into the cradle and see, according to their taste, a future Napoleon or a future canon of the Church. Those without children make do by acting as confidantes of the young or, in the case of Dr. Simão Bacamarte, by seeking consolation in their work. Dr. Bacamarte's story ("The Psychiatrist") is surely one of the earlier demonstrations of what Freud would come to call sublimation. Dr. Bacamarte, saddened by his childless marriage, throws himself into the neglected subject of psychopathology as "an opportunity for Lusitanian and, more specifically, Brazilian science to cover itself with 'imperishable laurels.'"

What makes "The Psychiatrist" a *tour de force* is that it skewers revolutionary politics as brilliantly as it skewers the scientism represented by Dr. Bacamarte. The measure of Machado's originality, as the historian Edwin Williamson noted, is that he attacked theories like Positivism when such theories were in their prime. The Positivism of Auguste Comte—which apparently caught on especially well in Brazil—was but the latest expression of man's foolish ambition to eradicate evil from the world. The psychiatrist Dr. Bacamarte is described in such a way as to place him alongside Don Quixote ("that illustrious lunatic," as the knight of la Mancha is called in one of Machado's short stories) in the annals of educated waywardness.

The totally earnest and impressively learned Dr. Bacamarte (he reads Averroës in his rare moments of leisure) would cure madness. He finds that its manifestations are many and varied, and so he commits to his newly constructed asylum, the Green

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House, one after another of the townspeople of Itaguai. As alarming numbers of Itaguaians disappear off the streets, the community tries to rouse itself in defense. The worthy town fathers, employing the oblique tactics so familiar to readers of Cervantes, adopt their best bedside manner to try to deal with the megalomaniac in their midst: they approach him through his wife, hoping they can prompt Mrs. Bacamarte to curb her husband's terrifying diagnostic activities. To soften her up, the town council holds a banquet in her honor, toasting her as

> the wife of the new Hippocrates, the muse of science, an angel, the dawn, charity, consolation, life itself. Her eyes were two stars, according to Crispim Soares, and two suns, by a Councilman's less modest figure. The psychiatrist found all this a bit tiresome but showed no signs of impatience. He merely leaned toward his wife and told her that such flights of fancy, although permissible in rhetoric, were unsubstantiated in fact.

The lower orders are far less polite than the authorities. The mob's uprising against the Green House—"that Bastille of human reason"—gives Machado a chance to evoke the Latin American coup d'état in all of its chaotic glory. The people march on the asylum, the town militia defends it, and when the smoke clears, eleven are dead and the insurrectionary chief, the barber Porfirio, is poised to strip the town fathers of their authority. In seizing power, Porfirio issues a manifesto that inveighs against a "corrupt and irresponsible Town Council" without mentioning either Dr. Bacamarte or the Green House. The townspeople who screamed for Dr. Bacamarte's blood are outraged to learn that the man who led them, their new Protector, Porfirio, has cut a deal with the psychiatrist. Seldom have crackpot science and the crazy logic of Latin political upheaval been combined to such good effect as in this long short story.

Mental illness was fodder for satire, but also something Machado tried to describe from the inside. The 1892 novel *Quincas Borba*, translated in 1954 as *Philosopher or Dog?*, becomes a case history of delusion—not a graphically detailed case history, in the style of the naturalists, but a spare and almost fablelike case history in the Machadian style. The burden of this work is that humility is so rare a virtue among men—and preening egoism so universal a vice—that it represents a kind of normalization for a humble man from provincial Barbacena, Brazil, to become convinced that he is the Emperor Louis Napoleon of France. The man in question, Rubião by name, has inherited wealth that he does not know how to manage. Being a hick from the sticks, Rubião is an especially vulnerable *homem de espírito*. He is unrequitedly in love with the São Paulo society lady Sophia de Palha, and his feverish bids to become her lover are used by Sophia and her businessman-husband to milk his fortune. The Palhas and other hangers-on are stuffed with good food and fine cigars at Rubião's table, in payment for which they stuff their simple-minded host with compliments. Rubião's delusions of grandeur grow out of the exchange.

Machado's critique of certain currents of modern thought comes through in the novel. The philosopher of the title, Quincas Borba, is Rubião's aged friend. At his death, Quincas Borba leaves Rubião not just the Borba family money, but the doctrine he invented, "Borbism" (also described in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, in which the philosopher appears as a young man). Borbism is a cheerily brutal creed that seems to take the thought of Thomas Hobbes and cross it with French Positivism and English Social Darwinism. Under Borbism, "envy is nothing but a fighting admiration . . . as fighting or struggle is the great function of the human race, all bellicose feelings tend toward its welfare."

Less outlandish than Quincas Borba but no less misguided is Rubião's other would-be intellectual mentor, Dr. João de Souza Camacho. This quintessential Latin ideologue-pedagogue tempts Rubião to found a

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newspaper and to try to enter politics. Camacho is the busy writer and politician who pens treatises

> in a style at once thin and turgid. Someone who collected those first fruits of Camacho made an index of his principles and aspirations—order through liberty, liberty through order—authority cannot abuse the law without slapping itself—principles are the spiritual necessity of young nations as well as of old, etc., etc. . . . In the Chamber he spoke at length on administrative matters, accumulated figures, articles of legislation, fragments of reports, and passages from French writers (though these were poorly translated).

The novelist's experience as a state functionary was not lost on him. The faulty amalgam of social science and belles-lettres that we see in Dr. Camacho is no relic of Machado's time, either. What comes out of institutes, academies, and think tanks from Guatemala City to Montevideo to this day bears a family resemblance to "those first fruits of Camacho."

The final "ism" that Machado takes out after in this book is allied—theoretically, at least—with liberalism: capitalism. (I issue the qualification because the Latin Americans, in practicing monopoly capitalism for most of their history, have not done justice to liberal, that is, free-market, capitalism.) Machado is as urbane as ever in delivering his anticapitalist views. His critique makes better reading than the sour grapes anticapitalism of such conservative Spanish writers as Miguel de Unamuno and Salvador de Madariaga, who railed against the machine age ushered in by British and German upstarts deemed to have usurped the preeminent position in Europe once held by their own country. As a colonial—and, for that matter, a colonial tied to Portugal, the lesser of the two Iberian lights—Machado may well have felt safely out of such national competitions.

His businessmen are scoundrels and *tolos*. Christiano Palha of *Quincas Borba* may be the most rotten of the bunch. The Machadian dissection of male sexual jealousy is unsparing, as I have said, but this young man's lack of sexual jealousy—a lack traceable to his acquisitiveness—may be even worse, in Machado's view. Palha is compared to King Candaules who wanted others to see how beautiful his wife was. A thoroughly up-to-date philosophical materialist, Palha puts it this way: he "mustn't be jealous of the optic nerve." Sophia de Palha is properly indignant at Rubião's fumbling attempts at flirtation because they are observed by others and could lead to a questioning of her matronly honor. So what?, says her husband. He needs her to keep buttering up Rubião so Rubião will continue to fund the Palha investment schemes and not press for repayment of past loans. What Machado is saying, in effect, is that capitalism makes men sell their wives.

The buying and selling of human beings as slaves—which took place in Brazil until 1888—is a scourge to which "Borbism," of course, accommodates itself with ease. Machado gives his made-up doctrine the same quotient of biological racism that ran through the real-life doctrines of the day, including Positivism and Social Darwinism. Under Borbism—which Quincas Borba also calls "Humanitism"—chattel slavery is a positive good that aids the evolution of man. Machado's characters banter about a new shipment of slaves into Rio, or they haggle with their siblings over the apportionment of real estate and houseboys upon the death of a family patriarch. Machado's disgust at commerce in slaves undergirds his view of commerce in general.

A politics based on property rights leads to property in man, he seems to say in his 1905 story called "Father Versus Mother." In this rather O. Henryish work, an impoverished white couple can only keep and raise its newborn baby if the family finances improve, and the only income that presents itself is the bounty to be earned if the father catches and turns in a fugitive slave woman. The woman is pregnant; unwilling to bear a child in bondage, she aborts it once she has

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been captured. Hence the life of a black child has been sacrificed for that of a white child. Usually, the evils of slavery are presented without the overt sense of authorial outrage expressed in "Father Versus Mother." *Counselor Ayres' Memorial* (1908), set during the turmoil of emancipation, is a novel in the form of a diary that tries to come to terms with the slavery question through the sensibility of a retired diplomat. In this, Machado's last work, we finally have a narrator who is perhaps too Parnassian in his hyperrefined impersonality. Counselor Ayres is too coy, too cut off from his fellow human beings, to give us an adequate rendering of the other players of the drama. The book is a disappointing finale, lacking the comedy, the lambent unpredictability, and the incisiveness of the other works. It does, however, convey one thing sharply: a pessimism about emancipation, however unjust the institution of slavery. Machado would like to know what these men and women of degraded condition, the former slaves, will do with themselves now. In his diary entries, Counselor Ayres praises lavishly the young widow Fidelia, a plantation owner who swears she will not abandon her liberated slaves as they move into an uncertain future. The novel's judgment of Fidelia is rather unclear, like much else in this puzzlingly vague work, but Machado appears to be issuing an oblique rebuke of the white aristocracy for promising a stability it did not, perhaps could not, deliver.

Who it was who freed Brazil's slaves goes unmentioned in *Counselor Ayres' Memorial*. It was the emperor of Brazil, a significant fact if we are to understand the kind of constitutional monarchy that Portugal bequeathed to Brazil, and therefore the kind of monarchist that Machado was. Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian peninsula caused a crisis of legitimacy in Spain's overseas territories, but not in Portugal's, because the Portuguese King John VI weathered the Napoleonic occupation in Brazil. John VI's descendants stayed in Brazil and went on, with imperial legitimacy and political popularity intact, to declare the colony an independent country and, just before the belated coming of the republic in the late 1880s, to abolish slavery. It appears that Machado liked the gradualism represented by the Brazilian monarchy. As Edwin Williamson observed, "though a low-born mulatto, he regarded the monarchy as a necessary fiction for unifying a nation whose inherent divisions he knew all too well from his own experience." The Borbas and Bacamartes of the elite classes would replace existing institutions like monarchy with efficient and rational structures. But they would, in the name of ridding the world of its messy social problems, inadvertently do away with human freedom.

Not that Roman Catholicism—the institution at the top of the new social scientists' list of outmoded structures—escaped Machado's satirical gaze. He subjects the Church to affectionate teasing, and more. So much more, in fact, that there is considerable basis for saying that Machado was not a throne-and-altar conservative but just a throne one. What makes the Church's final value for him—either as a spiritual entity or as a means of social cohesion—hard to discern is that, while some of his cruellest (and funniest) jests come at the expense of Roman Catholic liturgy and doctrine, he forbears to hold the believers themselves in contempt. Brás Cubas, for example, begins to express disdain for a religious mother and daughter, but pulls back by saying he is "laughing to myself at their superstition—a philosophical laugh, objective and superior." Machado is so thorough a skeptic that his doubts take in doubt itself.

Critics of various stripes have come up with their own Machados that are lopsided yet still in certain ways accurate. Writers on the left are captivated by Machado's pre-Pirandellian scrutiny of social roles, and his pre-Freudian peeling away of the hypocrisies small and large that get us through the day. Susan Sontag, in her Introduction to *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, is properly circumspect about reading into Machado's fic-

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tion the literary trends of her time, but in the end she does just that. She homes in on the "ragingly self-absorbed" quality of a Brás Cubas or a Counselor Ayres, but by insisting that there is "despair behind the loquacious sprightly musings" of the Machadian narrator, she turns Machado into a 1950s-style existentialist. Sontag fails to do his humor full justice. And she misses entirely this traditionalist's deep disdain for the idea of progress. The motto "Order and Progress" (almost a parody of Dr. Camacho's "order through liberty, liberty through order") is emblazoned on the flag of modern-day Brazil. This ominous slogan would prompt a bitter Machadian laugh, the more bitter of course in view of the "scientific" program of repression carried out in its name by the technocratic Brazilian military of the 1960s and 1970s.

On the aristocratic right, we have critics like José Raimundo Maia Neto, who places Machado in the European philosophic tradition. Maia Neto savors the world-weary resignation with which a Counselor Ayres or a Bento Santiago views life. For him, Machado's hostility to meliorative programs puts him in the ranks of Christian skeptics such as Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, and Roman skeptics such as Pyrrho of Elis. Maia Neto sees in Machado a sublime indifference to the fate of fallen humanity, and applauds him for it. But this emphasis on the superrefined aesthete of Parnassus slights the power of Machado's condemnation of slavery, and ignores a terrestrial and touching subject that is essential to him: the yearning for procreation and the makeshift relationships that spring up when procreation is not possible.

Satirists of both the Right (Swift) and the Left (Voltaire) win words of admiration from Machado. As for his own moral-political vision of the good, it is not clear that he has one. The emperor of Brazil was right to ban slavery. But the country to Brazil's north that fought a civil war over slavery is barely mentioned by Machado; evidently, he sees no successful overcomings of that iniquitous European import to the New World. The only certainty we sense in Machado is twofold: that institutions like the Church and the crown are in many respects laughable—and that we must cling to these *faute de mieux*.

Machado writes again and again of adding up a person's good deeds and his evil deeds, and arriving at a moral bottom line. That any given computation of this sort usually comes to a halt before the bottom line is reached appears quite deliberate. Bento Santiago ends up an affectless "Dom Casmurro" ("sad sack" would be our rough equivalent) because he avoided priesthood but not cuckoldry—or so, anyway, he thinks. Brás Cubas totes up his life and finds himself slightly ahead of the game only because he failed to reproduce. Bringing no children into this cruel world makes him feel like a "small winner." In taking this "small winner" who proclaims his partiality and his callousness, and conveying through his voice an impartial and complete world, Machado achieves an artistic feat of the highest magnitude. Such a feat calls for the kind of sensibility that F. R. Leavis saw in George Eliot. Eliot, said Leavis, "deals in the weakness and ordinariness of human nature, but doesn't find it contemptible, or show either animus or self-deceiving indulgence towards it." The lightening bolts flung down at us by the gods are meant to wound. What reach us from Machado's Parnassus are, instead, flashes of truth that make the darkness recede.

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Women & politics: Madame de Tencin

by Renee Winegarten

Do you think, Ibben, that it enters a woman's head to become the mistress of a minister in order to sleep with him? What an idea! It is so as to present him with five or six petitions every morning.
—Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, 1721.

If ever the early eighteenth century saw such a creature as a female political animal it was the "scandalous" Claudine Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin. She was also the author of *Mémoires du Comte de Comminges*, a novel about love and self-sacrifice that was still reducing its readers to floods of tears well into the following century. Fascinated by the political game, she simply had to know the state of play and contrive to be a party to it. She could judge—without any excess of charity—the leading political players of the moment. What she wanted was to influence the course of the game in a direction that suited herself rather than them. It was a dream that came within an inch of fulfillment.

With tireless energy she worked for years to further the career of her brother, the somewhat disreputable Pierre Guérin, abbé de Tencin. There were those who suspected him of simony. Others disapproved of him for pursuing members of the Jansenist sect and hounding an aged unworldly bishop from his diocese. From time to time, Tencin had serious doubts about his own abilities and merits, and his sister (after Lady Macbeth) had to screw his failing courage to the sticking place. It was she who helped him to rise from bishop to cardinal and ultimately minister of state. She thoroughly enjoyed all this ceaseless activity on his behalf, this sense of being privately at the center of things, supremely in the know, suggesting possibilities, advising men who had the power to act in public affairs visibly as she could not. It was a perilous game, marked by obstacles and setbacks to be faced with courage and perseverance. Influence through her brother was the goal. If some "great engine" might bring him eventually to power as prime minister, she meant to be one of its principal levers.

Her early life reads like something out of her novels, with their heavy fathers (and grasping stepmothers) who imprison disobedient sons, or force their unwilling daughters into a convent. Born in 1682, she was the youngest of five children of an upwardly mobile family. In a few generations, the Guérins, descended from an itinerant peddler, had risen to be distinguished lawyers and prominent figures in Grenoble. In order to preserve the inheritance of his elder children, her father sent her to a convent when she was eight years old, and then he insisted that she take the veil. She pleaded with him, making it plain to him and to all and sundry that she had no vocation. He was not to be moved.

Seven years later, at the ecclesiastical commission of inquiry that took place after her father's death, it became known that the

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young girl had received a letter from her father, who threatened that, if she refused to make her vows, he would have her confined "between four walls." According to a sympathetic witness, the girl had always shown a distaste for convent life, had scarcely obeyed the rule, and had made no secret of her desire for freedom. Mme. de Tencin was not released from her vows until 1712, when she was thirty, an age then usually regarded as the terminal point for a woman's sexual career. Many continued to speak of her with a certain contempt as "an unfrocked nun," although her release had been granted in due ecclesiastical form.

The years of concentrating on one aim, the effort to obtain her freedom, doubtless gave her an insight into how to maneuver and manipulate those who could be useful to her. The experience also prompted a fairly jaundiced view of her fellow human beings. "The great mistake of intelligent people is their failure to credit that men are as stupid as they are," she once acidly remarked. Fixed and determined she certainly was, over the long haul to her freedom, but otherwise there seems nothing except her experience of enforced restraint to presage the passion for life, the boundless ambition, and the consciousness of her superior perspicacity that she was soon to reveal.

Free of the cloister at last, and launched into Parisian society by one of her elder sisters, Mme. de Tencin rapidly made up for lost time. According to a contemporary, she was rather good-looking, full of charm, very animated, and noted for her superior wit. She never married ("madame" is a courtesy title), and the list of her lovers is long. Many of them were persons of note and political influence, men who could be of service to her and her brother.

Among those who did not figure in this category was an artillery officer named Destouches. While he was absent, she gave birth to a son. The baby was then left on the steps of the church of Saint-Jean Le Rond. This was to be the noted philosophe, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert. On his return, Destouches found the infant and placed him with foster parents. Yet Mme. de Tencin never took the slightest interest in her talented (and impecunious) offspring, even when he became famous. She did not mention him in her will, leaving all her property to her doctor, one of her longstanding lovers. The eighteenth-century attitude to children could be famously cavalier: witness later the humanitarian Jean-Jacques Rousseau who notoriously deposited all his children in the foundling hospital. However, the stain on Mme. de Tencin's reputation, as on Rousseau's, has remained indelible. The strange thing is that she alludes with tender feeling to illegitimate babies in her novels. It might be supposed either that Mme. de Tencin's callous conduct preyed on her mind (an unlikely hypothesis?) or that she thought fiction required a warmer, more generous attitude.

This was not the only scandal to be attached to her name. Along with many others, she seized the opportunity for enrichment provided by the rise of the Scottish adventurer and wizard financier, John Law, who advocated the introduction of guaranteed paper money in place of gold. When, after the frenzy of speculation, the crash came, Mme. de Tencin had managed to extricate herself in time with a considerable fortune. Some of her friends were not so lucky. One of her lovers, the then ruined banker La Fresnaye, who owed her large sums of money, committed suicide in her house. La Fresnaye, his mind deranged, had left a long libellous suicide note, accusing her of the worst crimes. Mme. de Tencin found herself imprisoned in the Bastille (at the same time as Voltaire, after he had been thrashed by the thugs of the chevalier de Rohan for a putative insult to the nobleman's person). Her innocence was finally proclaimed after a lengthy legal procedure, and she was released, but inevitably some of the mud stuck.

To return to her more powerful lovers: she was briefly the mistress of the dissolute Philippe d'Orléans, before he became regent. Thinking of her, he is supposed to

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have remarked that "he did not like whores who talked politics between the sheets." She was present nonetheless at the free and easy suppers he gave at the Palais-Royal, among his friends whom he called his "roués," and their various mistresses. Her conquests included foreign diplomats like the poet Matthew Prior, then English ambassador, and the distinguished Count Hoym, in the service of King Augustus II of Poland. Particularly notable among her lovers was the eminent statesman and writer, Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, who came to France to negotiate the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). He was also busy plotting to restore the house of Stuart to the English throne, and constantly in communication with James, "the Old Pretender." Through Lord Bolingbroke, Mme. de Tencin and her brother would have lasting relations with the Stuart court in exile.

According to Lord Bolingbroke, in a letter to the Stuart Pretender, Mme. de Tencin displayed as much ambition and skill as any woman he had ever known, and—supreme accolade—even as much as any man. He said she tried to elicit from him whether some action was afoot, employing considerable subtlety and making use of all the advantages of her sex. She spoke of current affairs to which she had evidently given much thought, he declared. In her view, because of the aged Louis XIV's ill health, no military move could be made for the moment. However, with the duc d'Orléans confirmed as regent, doubtless some great enterprise would be undertaken—presumably, this meant war in favor of the Stuarts. Bolingbroke did not make light of any feelers she put out because he was fully aware of her onetime intimacy with Philippe d'Orléans, and he knew of her liaison with abbé Dubois, the future regent's close adviser.

Her influence with abbé Dubois is confirmed in the memoirs of a writer of genius, the duc de Saint-Simon, who cordially loathed Mme. de Tencin and her brother. Grand partisan of the old aristocracy to which he belonged, Saint-Simon would not be alone in accusing the upstart Tencins of incest. According to him, Mme. de Tencin became the confidant and "public mistress" of Dubois, "openly in command of everything at his abode, and holding court at her own as being the unique source of favor and fortune." The Prussian ambassador noted, in a dispatch to his sovereign, that Count Hoym, representative of Poland, was always favorably received by Dubois, thanks to the good offices of Mme. de Tencin. Clearly, said the Prussian ambassador, Count Hoym viewed her liaison with Dubois as "a very suitable means" for penetrating the true intentions of the French court—the implication being that such an approach through the lady in question is a good model to follow. (It was a method used later with momentous consequences by the Viennese ambassador with Mme. de Pompadour, through whose influence with Louis XV French foreign policy was to be changed in Austria's favor).

As for Dubois, the story goes that Mme. de Tencin had even helped him to become prime minister. Son of a modest provincial doctor, he was one of the rare members of the bourgeoisie to hold high political office. When, in 1715, Philippe d'Orléans became regent during the minority of Louis XV, his secretary and confidant Dubois rose to be the virtual ruler of the country. Never actually ordained, and notorious for his debauchery, abbé Dubois would move swiftly from abbé to archbishop and cardinal, much to the derision of the wits and *chansonniers* or versifying satirists, the sardonic commentators and rumor-mongers who served as forerunners of the yellow press of today. Mme. de Tencin is said to have had a dispatch sent in code by her onetime lover, Count Hoym, to his government, where he spoke of how important it would be for the regent to choose a prime minister of low rank, someone like Dubois, who came from nothing, raised from the mud of the gutter, who could be returned to his nullity whenever it suited his master to do so. The dispatch was duly intercepted and decoded,

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and the regent, amused by its impertinence, followed Hoym's advice. The tale is not entirely far-fetched, for Mme. de Tencin favored sending anonymous letters and communications of invented provenance: for her, novelist as well as political manipulator, it was all part of the gamble and the fun. Besides, it meant that she stayed secretly in command.

One thing is certain, however: her own indifference to rank. If she did inspire Count Hoym's dispatch, with its excessively derogatory language, it would have been tongue-in-cheek. The theme recurs in her novels. In *Le Siège de Calais*, for instance, a bourgeois displays high-souled feelings "above his birth, and rare even in the loftiest ranks of the nobility." Elsewhere, one of her heroines speaks of "this chimera of birth that men prize so highly." Yet another declares, in *Les Malheurs de l'amour*: "I am not affected by birth or rank." A contemporary remarked that in Mme. de Tencin's salon there was no question of social status: the only concern of its habitués, regarded without exception as intellects of equal dignity, was to put forward the most cogent arguments. This indifference to rank, this value placed upon merit and the equality of sensibility and intellect, may be seen as the nearest that Mme. de Tencin came to political principle. It was one of the more radical aspects of her salon, to be followed by the women who would inherit her mantle later in the eighteenth century.

Mme. de Tencin experienced a serious setback in 1723 with the demise of Dubois and of his master, the regent. Efforts to win the favor of the elderly Cardinal Fleury, when he became the new power in the land, were not producing the desired effect. Mme. de Tencin's brother had become embroiled in the bitter ecclesiastical dissensions of the age, the conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists that foreshadowed political upheavals to come. Fleury, however, wished to reach an accommodation between the warring parties. Mme. de Tencin's cosmopolitan salon, frequented then by churchmen and foreigners, appeared to him as a hotbed of intrigue and opposition. As Fleury saw it: "She has convinced fools that if her brother were made cardinal he would surely become prime minister, albeit after my death, for she does me the honour to consider this an impossibility while I am alive, even if she counts on that not being for long." In his view, "so preposterous a fantasy could only be believed by some Iroquois newly landed from America," but he felt that she was using it to bind people to her brother. Furious at having his death discussed as imminent, the aging Fleury saw to it that Mme. de Tencin was commanded to withdraw "without fuss" some distance from Paris because, he maintained, he had proof of her involvement in "intrigues displeasing to his Majesty." Internal exile was thus being employed as a punishment for recalcitrant females long before Napoleon used it so tellingly as a weapon against Mme. de Staël.

For Mme. de Tencin it was a considerable blow. She hastened to defend herself, claiming against all the evidence to have lived in retirement. As for intervening in public affairs, perish the thought! Fleury dismissed her excuses: "prudence requires that above all a person of your sex should only intervene in matters relating to her proper sphere." Mme. de Tencin was not silenced. "I must have explained myself badly in my letter," she told Fleury. "In asserting that I did not intervene and have never intervened in current affairs, I may not have stressed adequately the distinction I make between knowing about things and intervening in them." This was a distinction doubtless invented on the spur of the moment. All the same, Mme. de Tencin was claiming that knowledge of political affairs could rightly be regarded as part of woman's proper sphere, and that she was not to be confined solely to trivial, domestic, or private interests.

In her self-justification, Mme. de Tencin spoke of her affection for her brother, owning that she knew about his activities, and that she had distributed some of his

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writings on matters of religion, "but all that does not amount to having a hand in intrigues, or intervening in such affairs contrary to the propriety of my sex." It is difficult to resist a smile at the fencing of these astute characters, each of whom knew exactly what value to put upon the words of the other. And when, on being permitted to return to Paris, Mme. de Tencin thanked Fleury, requesting with an air of innocence his guidance on the line of conduct she should follow, it seems likely that she saw the humor of it. Fleury declined to act as her mentor: "Your sex encloses you naturally within certain limits which it is not necessary to recall to you, and you have far too much wit to fail to be aware of those you should suggest to yourself." Self-censorship was expected of her. This interchange reveals with perfect clarity the official line on female engagement in politics, a line which could be strongly enforced by authority whenever it chose. At the same time, the professed submission of the rebellious woman carries with it a flash of impertinence here and there. Both sides know perfectly well that at the first opportunity Mme. de Tencin will, within reason, do exactly as before and as she pleases.

If her salon was not directly a center of opposition as such (in that form it probably would not have been permitted to survive), nonetheless it was a place for independent thought and utterance, attended not only by outstanding men but also by gifted women such as Voltaire's mistress, Mme. du Châtelet, with her absorption in mathematics and science, and the proto-feminist Mme. Dupin de Chenonceaux, benefactress of Rousseau. Leading literary figures of the age, including abbé Prévost, author of *Manon Lescaut*, could be found there, along with the poet Marmontel, partisan of toleration and opponent of slavery, and the (then neglected) playwright Marivaux, on whose behalf Mme. de Tencin battled for ten years to have him elected a member of the Académie Française.

Many of the habitués of her salon, whom she called her "pets," were challenging thinkers and reformers. Among them was the utopian philosophe, abbé de Saint-Pierre, advocate of disarmament and international arbitration (later to be much admired by George Sand in her autobiography as the harbinger of many influential nineteenth-century humanitarian ideas). Abbé de Saint-Pierre had dared to publish a critical view of the authoritarian rule of Louis XIV. The outraged maréchal de Villeroy succeeded in having its author excluded from the Académie Française—"for having told the truth," said Mme. de Tencin, adding amusingly that this was the first victory the unlucky maréchal de Villeroy had won over the enemies of the late king. At various times, members of her salon included Fontenelle, proponent of modernity; the egalitarian Mably; Helvétius, atheist and materialist; and Montesquieu, whose *De l'esprit des lois* she helped to disseminate. Her salon was a place where significant changes in public opinion were being formulated.

In concrete, practical terms, though, the high political hopes of Mme. de Tencin were disappointed when, on the death of Fleury in 1743, Louis XV decided against appointing a prime minister. Although her brother was named minister of state, he never took charge of foreign affairs, as he would have liked, nor did he attain the highest office. "Who would have thought Tencin could be compared to Moses? Both saw the promised land, but neither of them entered it," gloated an acute *chansonnier* in pithy verse.

A new possibility for influence was glimpsed, even so, when Louis XV took as his mistress Mme. de La Tournelle (whom he later made duchesse de Châteauroux). She was one of five sisters, two of them having preceded her in Louis XV's bed. It appeared that she might be amenable to the influence of Mme. de Tencin's new friend, the duc de Richelieu. Great-nephew of the mighty and austere Cardinal Richelieu, he was made of different metal, being one of the most notorious and dangerous liber-

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tines of the age. Some fourteen years younger than Mme. de Tencin, the duc de Richelieu had become—if nothing more—her great ally and confidant. Her fascinating, witty, racy letters to him give voice to her contempt for the way in which the country was being governed—or rather not governed, in her opinion. "I tell you everything I am thinking and everything that comes to the tip of my pen," she wrote to him, not always prudently, given the surveillance of the post.

All Mme. de Tencin's ambitions now revolved around the duchesse de Châteauroux (who, as it happens, was discreetly biding her time to influence the king). Rather her than another, wrote Mme. de Tencin to Richelieu, for "she cannot do worse than what we are seeing now." In Mme. de Tencin's view, "A skillful woman knows how to mingle pleasure with the general interest and, without boring her lover, contrives to have him do what she wants." This was surely Mme. de Tencin's credo.

Writing to Richelieu, she comments that although all the king's ministers are incompetent "dwarfs," they throw their weight about even more than their predecessors under the Sun King himself—and what is worse, they "govern despotically." Vanity is the chief failing of the French, she opines before Stendhal (a later arriviste from Grenoble who was to recommend her to his sister as a model in the important art of pleasing members of all social classes). Mme. de Tencin finds that most intelligent people do not trouble themselves nowadays about public affairs; instead, they spend their time either in litigation or at the opera. Consequently, she foresees catastrophe: "The way affairs are being conducted, everything is inevitably going to the devil. People carry on in a stupid way, but in the end they will do so many stupid things that there will be an upheaval in every aspect of public affairs. These are in a parlous state . . . all this will end in a thunderclap." This prophecy was written over forty years before the French Revolution.

As for Louis XV, Mme. de Tencin could not conceal her disgust and scorn for a ruler who appeared to take so little interest in the affairs of the realm. "This monarch is a strange fellow. What is going on in his kingdom seems not to concern him, nothing bothers him," she wrote to the duc de Richelieu, absent at the wars. The king's ministers are more masters of the country than he is, she observed. "Once again in spite of myself I feel a certain degree of contempt for a person who lets everything ride according to the will of others. He needs to be ruled. The weight of the reins of State is too heavy for him, and since it is and always will be needful for him to entrust them to someone else, I should have preferred it to be my brother." She reminded Richelieu that "we have no connections"—for the Tencins had no powerful aristocratic family to back them, as was commonly the case with those in pursuit of political power. He could therefore count on their gratitude if he supported them in their ambitions.

When the duchesse de Châteauroux finally persuaded Louis XV to put himself at the head of his armies, Mme. de Tencin observed that this had required no small effort: "Between ourselves he could not command a company of grenadiers, but his presence will do much . . . In the eyes of the soldiers and the people, a king of any sort is what the Ark of the Lord was for the Hebrews." Mme. de Tencin's portrayal of Louis XV as a man bored by his role remains one of the most damning on record. The Goncourt brothers, writing more than a hundred years later, thought that she painted a portrait of Louis XV's weaknesses unequaled by any historian they knew. Mme. de Tencin had the impression that she herself was more bothered than the king about the country's welfare.

It was a stroke of ill luck for the Tencins that the duchesse de Châteauroux, who had decided to follow their advice at last, was suddenly taken ill, and died at the age of twenty-seven. Her successor as "official

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mistress," Mme. de Pompadour (sustained by the wealthy brothers Pâris and their banking house), although acquainted with Mme. de Tencin, had no need of her political acumen, having a sufficiency of her own. It was indeed the end of Mme. de Tencin's aspirations. She and her brother were now in their sixties. Mme. de Tencin had certainly acted as the prime mover, because after her death in 1749, her brother made no further effort to advance his political career.

When, in his *Lettres persanes*, Montesquieu had his Persian visitor to France express astonishment at the influential political role of Frenchwomen, the satirist—with some rhetorical exaggeration—was pointing to a real phenomenon. According to Montesquieu's Persian mouthpiece, "These women constitute a sort of republic; . . . it is like a new State within the State." Here in France were women who did not hesitate to speak to the minister on behalf of some courageous young colonel or some worthy abbé who had been overlooked. Such women were not necessarily royal favorites, for "there is no one who holds a position at court, in Paris or the provinces, without some woman through whose hands pass all the favors he grants and sometimes the injustices he can cause." Mme. de Tencin herself gave some useful career advice to her young protégé, Marmontel: she urged him to choose his friends among women rather than men, "because by means of women you do all you want with men." Men, she declared, are too busy with their own affairs to bother with yours, whereas women, if only out of idleness, will turn over in their minds how best to serve your interests.

Although ostensibly excluded by social convention and authority from playing any official or even unofficial political role, women (if determined enough) could discover various ways to circumvent their disenfranchisement. Men, in their quest for preferment, betrayed no qualms about employing women, largely behind the scenes. How frustrating this subordinate place must have appeared to a seriously enterprising and imaginative woman like Mme. de Tencin, supremely conscious of her superior abilities, can readily be guessed. Still, even crumbs from the table of power must have seemed better than nothing to the actively ambitious woman, and for some the element of secrecy may well have added a certain spice.

Mme. de Tencin had the pent-up energy of the years she had been forced to spend in the convent, energy that exploded into her many love affairs and her urge to influence matters of state. Devotion to her brother's career was a way of focusing that energy. She could be daring to the point of rashness in her obvious desire for a political role, indiscreet, apparently indifferent to scandal, and in revolt against heavy-handed authority in all its forms. Her contempt for the powers-that-be, extending to the monarch himself, suggests that she felt she could do better if only she had been given the opportunity. She could scarcely have done much worse than some of those who were then in command of the destiny of France.

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Louis Auchincloss at 80

by James W. Tuttleton

The publication of *The Atonement and Other Stories*, a collection of twelve new interconnected tales by Louis Auchincloss, was scheduled by Houghton Mifflin to coincide with his eightieth birthday on September 27.[1] This is indeed an occasion for celebration. For one thing, the round age of eighty offers a natural opportunity to reflect on an American literary career that has spanned a half-century. Since the deaths of Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling—as Jackson R. Bryer remarked some years ago in *Louis Auchincloss and His Critics* (1979)—Auchincloss now stands out as our most distinguished and versatile man of letters. In addition, the new collection also shows that, despite his advanced age, our greatest novelist of manners is (in his command of plot and characterization, and in the felicity of his narrative style) still a master of the shorter form as well.

With respect to this new collection, there are too many stories to discuss in detail, but some sense of the volume is suggested by Auchincloss's recurrent themes: advancing age, moral retrospection, the decline of the WASPs, and the desire to atone for past ills and, toward the end, to set things straight. The first tale, "The Atonement," meditates on the fate of the WASP conscience in a workplace and social world where other religious, racial, and ethnic forces have come into prominence. Of particular interest to me is Auchincloss's increasingly visible concern with how the prep-school Christian moral vision shapes the young for life. In this tale, a WASP businessman gets in with the wrong ethnic crowd and conspires in an illegal insider-trading scheme. Guilt overcomes Sandy Tremain, together with a strong impulse to confess his crime and to seek atonement. But grand gestures of moral heroism—such as we find in great saints and martyrs—are seemingly unavailable on Wall Street, where the always-changing relationship of ethics to the law makes Tremain's absolutist view of the world too simplistic and self-destructive.

Likewise, in "Honoria and Attila," Alexandra Schuyler Whelan, one of "the last of the WASPs," lives by the social rules of her mother but longs to violate them. Although she knows that she does so in marrying a social undesirable, her problem is that "she saw no one qualified to offer her the blood of the New Testament for the forgiveness of sins." The intensity of the moral passion in some of Auchincloss's characters is here quite striking. It gives to his work a religious depth that is rarely remarked by the reviewers, who seem inclined to ignore it because they cannot understand it.

"Realist in Babylon," on the other hand, deals with the problem of whether to appoint a known crook to the board of trustees of an episcopal boys' prep school. The problem of Auchincloss's WASPs is that

1 *The Atonement and Other Stories*, by Louis Auchincloss; Houghton Mifflin, 275 pages, $24.

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they seem be "throwing away, right and left, all the so-called privileges of their background." They do not seem to "realize, half of them, that those privileges, or the memory of them—in other people's minds—may be the only assets they have left. A goodly number of our new arrivals on the social scene want nothing better than to duplicate the ostensibly despised lives of yesterday's WASP. *Plus ça change. . . .*"

To the question of this decline of the WASP aristocracy I shall return in a moment, for I believe it to be a greatly misjudged matter. But for the present we may note that *The Atonement and Other Stories* also deals at some length with the idea of art. In "Ars Gratia Artis," the passion of religion is matched by a fanaticism over art equal to that of any Spanish Inquisitor's love of the faith. In this tale, a sinister young buyer, who works for a millionaire businessman, so rouses the man's acquisitive passion that he even builds an expensive new museum for his extraordinary collection. Lovat, the young buyer, doesn't mind a bit that the rich man's children are virtually disinherited.

"The Hidden Muse" even seems to be autobiographical. Here David Hallowell, a former World War II naval officer, becomes a lawyer, although his passion is really literature. Poignantly, he discovers that the price of becoming a writer who explores the inner working of the law is his inevitable estrangement from his colleagues in the firm.

Several of the stories in the new collection deal with shifting sexual mores. In "The Last Great Divorce," a woman coolly dumps her first husband so as to marry his more internationally famous best friend. The new husband is disillusioned with her calculating spirit: in divorcing she wants simply "to correct an early error." He atones (or gets his revenge?) by retiring from the fast track and taking an insignificant Cornell teaching appointment in provincial Ithaca. In "The Maenads," on the other hand, Erastus Thorne, the *arbiter elegantiarum* of Southhampton's summer colony (vacationing wives, mostly) nearly loses his social position when he unexpectedly falls in love with a much younger but blowsy adventuress. In "The Ancient Greeks," finally, a closeted older homosexual teacher at the Pulver Academy advises a young teacher to indulge his perversion only on summer vacations in Europe, never at the school or in America. Later on, the younger man is betrayed and exposed by the older man, who gets him sacked.

Louis Stanton Auchincloss was born in Lawrence, New York, in 1917 and was brought up in New York City. He has had, as I have remarked, a very long and complicated career. His family was wealthy and large—full of cousins, uncles, aunts, and in-laws. As a boy he spent his summers at Bar Harbor and on Long Island. Later he went to Groton and Yale, where he was Phi Beta Kappa and editor of the *Yale Literary Magazine.*

After three years in New Haven, he left Yale and entered the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, where he took a law degree in 1941. During World War II, he spent four years at sea, where he had ample time to read the great novelists of manners and to serve his own apprenticeship as a writer. After the war, he returned to New York City and practiced estate law until he retired from the Wall Street firm of Hawkins, Delafield, and Wood in 1986. Despite his devotion to his now-deceased wife, Adèle, and their children and grandchildren—and despite the years devoted to client trusts and wills, as well as to city commissions, charities, and municipal offices (he was for some time president of the Museum of the City of New York)—Auchincloss has nevertheless published more than fifty volumes of fiction, literary criticism, history, biography, autobiography, and social history. Among his many novels are *The Indifferent Children* (1947), *Sybil* (1952), *A Law for the Lion* (1953), *The Great World and Timothy Colt* (1956), *Venus in Sparta* (1958), *The Pursuit of the Prodigal* (1959), *The House of Five Talents*

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(1960), *Portrait in Brownstone* (1962), *The Rector of Justin* (1964), *The Embezzler* (1965), *The House of the Prophet* (1980), *The Book Class* (1984), *The Golden Calves* (1988), and *Fellow Passengers* (1989).

He has also produced a great many volumes of short stories—among them *The Injustice Collectors* (1950), *Skinny Island* (1981), *Narcissa and Other Fables* (1983), *False Gods* (1992), *Tales of Yesteryear* (1994)—and a great many studies in literary criticism such as *Pioneers and Caretakers* (1965) and *Edith Wharton: A Woman in Her Time* (1971). An excellent selection from his short-story volumes, *The Collected Stories of Louis Auchincloss* (Houghton Mifflin), was made by the author himself in 1994. It includes a number of my personal favorites, including the highly reflexive tale "The Novelist of Manners," which makes wry, witty mincemeat of a number of Auchincloss's negative reviewers.[2]

The world brought to life in Auchincloss's stories is the nineteenth- and twentieth-century life of the metropolitan rich in New York City, particularly the lives of the lawyers, bankers, trust officers, corporation executives, and their wives and daughters. As a lawyer, Auchincloss knows them in their Park Avenue apartments and in their Wall Street offices. He sees the glitter and glamour of their world, its arrogant materialism and its unexpected generosities. He knows the rigidity of its conventions—just how far they can be bent, at what point they break, just when convention may break a character. He understands what happens to the idealistic men and the unfulfilled women of this world. And he is able to tell their stories with unusual sympathy. Rarely has Auchincloss ventured from this small but exclusive world, because it is the world he knows best. For this "narrowness" he has been criticized. But if he does not write panoramic novels of the U.S.A., great fluid puddings encompassing the whole of the American scene, it is because he has learned from Henry James the lesson James tried to teach Mrs. Wharton: that she *must* be "tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a backyard in New York." The New York *haut monde* is, as it were, Louis Auchincloss's backyard.

In telling the stories of these upper-class New Yorkers, Auchincloss continues to remind us of Henry James in the emphasis he gives to the moral issues that grow out of their social lives. Because he once called one of his critical books *Reflections of a Jacobite* (1961), reviewers long ago concluded that it is enough to describe him as an imitator of the master. He most differs from James, though, in the informed analysis he is able to give to the complex problems of ethics in the legal profession—a command of the world of Wall Street brokers and bankers which James himself sorely regretted not having. Auchincloss called himself a Jacobite because so much of his youthful reading was "over the shoulder of Henry James."

To read the fiction of Proust, Trollope, Meredith, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Edith Wharton in the light of the criticism, fiction, and letters of James, Auchincloss observed, is to be exposed to the full range of possibility for the novel of manners, "to be conducted through the literature of [James's] time, English, American, French and Russian, by a kindly guide of infinitely good manners, who is also infinitely discerning, tasteful and conscientious." James, for Auchincloss, has been a "starting point," a "common denominator." But, once started, Auchincloss has always gone his own way—often qualifying and contesting, as well as defining and enlarging, the social insights of the nineteenth-century novelist of manners.

Not all of his novels are in this vein—he is fascinated by the unexhausted possibilities of the novel of character as well—but most

2 For a remarkable introduction to Auchincloss's early life and literary apprenticeship, the reader may wish to consult his autobiography, *A Writer's Capital* (1974). Carol W. Gelderman's biography *Louis Auchincloss: A Writer's Life* (1993) extends coverage of the writer into the early 1990s.

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of them hinge upon the imperatives of private morality in a world where social morality no longer, apparently, exists. In many of these books Auchincloss explores the ambiguities of selfhood, affirming, finally, the freedom and autonomy of the human personality. Most novelists of manners, profoundly influenced by the behaviorism of the naturalistic sciences (Wharton, Wells, Bennett, O'Hara, Marquand, for example), tend to believe that the personality is thoroughly conditioned by the material environment. They create character, as Virginia Woolf objected, in very close correlation to, and through descriptions of, houses, clothes, furniture, and the like. Auchincloss rejects this approach to characterization. For him, "character" or personality exists independent of the web of the material environment that surrounds it. As Ida Trask Hartley observes in *Portrait in Brownstone*, in describing the narrow grey limestone façade of Mr. Robbins's house—with its "grinning lions' heads and balconies for flowerpots supported by squatting ladies, and topped with a giant dormer studded with bull's-eye windows": "Nobody passing it today would believe that it had not been built by the most pushing parvenu. Yet I know how little the houses of that era sometimes expressed the souls of their occupants."

In *A Law for the Lion*, Eloise Dilworth wants to find out whether there is any real "identity" beneath the various roles she has played during her lifetime—the childish niece to her aunt and uncle, the submissive wife to her indifferent husband, the taken-for-granted mother to her children. Her search for an answer leads her to reject the arbitrary manners and conventions of the social world she has been brought up in. But her losses are more than compensated for by her discovery that there is a real "self" beneath the functions imposed on her by her social existence. This kind of "Who am I?" theme is also developed in *Sybil*, *Portrait in Brownstone*, and *The House of Five Talents.*

A variation on it is the "Who is he?" theme developed in *The Rector of Justin.* In this novel, Frank Prescott, recently deceased headmaster of a preparatory school, is recreated through the differing recollections and impressions of several characters—the priggish young admirer, the irreverent daughter, the wife, the friends, the students and alumni. What the novel suggests is that we can never know what Prescott was really like because none of the narrators knew the real Prescott—he presented a different side to each of them. It might well be asked whether there was any "real" Prescott behind his various masks. The answer is yes, but we can never know him except as a composite of the limited points of view of his various biographers. Auchincloss's dramatic technique in this "conventional novel of character" creates a built-in ambiguity comparable to that of James's *The Awkward Age* or, for that matter, to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

The dominant note of Auchincloss's fiction, at least in recent years, has been pathos rather than tragedy. Central to that pathos is the sense that his world of social privilege is dying. It should be said, however, that the class of rich and powerful families that Auchincloss writes about is not about to give up the ghost. It still controls great wealth, preserves its status in schools like Groton, Harvard, and Yale; it manages powerful institutions in commerce, government, and the arts; and it discloses itself through distinctive styles in speech, dress, and deportment.

This group is not really a class in the sociological sense, and it is not monolithic; some of the children will wind up at Amherst or Brown or may marry attractive or wealthy *arrivistes*. But such have always been its processes of networking, adaptation, and self-renewal. To those whose ideas are formed by the television show "Hard Copy" or "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," Auchincloss's world will hardly be visible, but that is because it shuns the kind of attention courted by the nouveaux. (It was quite an embarrassment to some members of the clan when Jacqueline Bouvier,

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Louis's cousin, fell in with the Kennedys.) Moreover, although Auchincloss himself may now be eighty, and although the past that he and his parents once knew may be dissolving into a representation charged with bittersweet pathos, the group is continuously renewing itself, not disappearing. Keep an eye on his sons, and their children, and their friends. Who knows? Some of them may also turn out to be the next novelists of that world.

Despite the oft-heard complaint, then, I am not at all convinced that Auchincloss is guilty of what Edith Wharton in *A Backward Glance* (1934) called the tendency not infrequent in novelists of manners—Balzac and Thackeray among them—to be "dazzled by contact with the very society they satirize." Auchincloss is fascinated by the world he portrays: he loves the details of an estate settlement as much as Thackeray loved the stylish little supper parties of Mrs. Rawdon Crawley; he is as fascinated by the complexities of a corporation merger as Proust was by the intricacies of precedence; and he is as delighted by the eccentricities of the rich as Balzac was by the spectacle of miserly greed.

But if Auchincloss loves his world, he is not taken in by it. Conscious of the moral and social incongruities between his world and that of poorer New Yorkers, he is as disturbed as anyone else that "no matter how painstakingly Proust underlines the dullness, the selfishness, and the fatuity of the Guermantes set, they remain to the end still invested with much of the glamour in which his imagination clothed them." His love for his affluent world is one of an artist for his material, which is quite another thing from his feeling for it as a man. Every writer, he has observed in *Reflections of a Jacobite*, has two points of view about the society in which he lives:

> that of a citizen and that of an artist. The latter is concerned only with the suitability of society as material for his art. Just as a liberal journalist may secretly rejoice at the rise of a Senator McCarthy because of the opportunity which it affords him to write brilliant and scathing denunciations of demagogues, so will the eye of the novelist of manners light up at the first glimpse of social injustice. For his books must depend for their life blood on contrast and are bound to lose both significance and popularity in a classless society.

Our awareness of this distinction between society as experienced and society as transformed in fiction ought to discourage us, then, from slighting, on the spurious ground of "political correctness," a splendid writer who insists on exploring inequities and ambiguities from the inside of the social mechanism. If we are fully open to the literary quality of his work—to aesthetic questions of form and style—the judgment of some very sensitive critics will become irresistibly clear. I mean such critics as John Betjeman, who toward the end of his life acclaimed the clarity of the prose of Louis Auchincloss. Elizabeth Bowen called him "a storyteller with a beautifully clear and direct style—a classically good English style," and she remarked that he is "one of the ablest story-tellers and *direct* psychologists using the English language." Angus Wilson likewise defined him as "a very clever and subtle student of human social behavior"; and Anthony Burgess commended the power with which Auchincloss's fiction "presents the real twentieth-century world, very sharply, very subtly, very elegantly." We cannot fully understand the workings of power in the United Sates—legal, financial, and social—without attending to his fiction, as Gore Vidal has rightly observed. And recently, in *Vanity Fair*, Susan Cheever called Auchincloss "one of the best writers alive." If these critics are indeed right—and they are—it behooves us to get to know even more of his work.

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Poems *by Phillis Levin, Robert B. Shaw, Robert Pack & Donald Justice*

Ontological

for Elfie Raymond

If it were not so bright,
Not so dark;
If there had been another hour,

Another storm,
Something to keep track of
Or something to hold at bay;

If there had been no bird
On the barest tree,
With one bitter crumb in its mouth,

One little speck;
If the honey surrounding that crumb
Had not been sweet,

If the evening had been less silent,
Humming one note
Without leaving any name,

Calling me to a field whose sickle moon
Made it clear
That nothing would speak;

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If the way to the field
Had been less glorious,
A drop of dew beside a milkweed seed,

A ladybug scampering toward light,
And flowers on fire
Swaying among tall grasses—

A river of paper lanterns at dawn;
If the current did not carry
The scent of cyclamen,

Wild as grief
Spilling its horn of plenty,
Outlasting the final kiss of day.

—Phillis Levin

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Espalier

Hugging its trellis, backed by sunny bricks,
this tree will never cast a shadow. Splayed
symmetrically, arboreal crucifix,
its aim in life appears to be to trade

its three dimensions for a tidier two.
You say it makes you wince, that rigid reach
to left and right. But all that gardeners do
along these lines ensures the tender peach

firm buttressing against the wind, and sun's
largesse enlarged on a south-facing wall.
Such fruits are juicier than unfettered ones
whose laden branches splinter as they sprawl.

What am I saying? What we call a fetter
may be a means of turning green to gold.
Words, I have found, abide the seasons better
spread to the light in meter's faithful hold.

—*Robert B. Shaw*

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Nothing

If knowing I know nothing comforts me,
That out of nothing sudden space commenced
In time to cool and bring forth stars, a galaxy
To mother us and call our own, immense
By our brief human lights, and yet just one
Rotating structure among multitudes,
Then who will notice nothing when we're gone;
Can nothing comfort when there's no one left to brood
That out of nothing cooling space commenced?
Perhaps some enterprise beyond our need
For solace in the face of nothing might be sensed
In nature's unrelenting laws which heed
No animal or human cry, some yet to be
Vast consciousness, for which I am the seed,
Nurtured from nothing by the light of stars to see
If knowing I know nothing comforts me.

—*Robert Pack*

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Couplets

i

Have I not waited with a numbed impatience
In polite pale rooms with polite anonymous patients?

ii

The auctioneer lifts his gavel. *Going! Going!*
Whence come we, what are we, whither are we going?

iii

The years stand lonely on their sidings now like abandoned cars.
The wind is in the wires and snow sifts down on the cars.

iv

The clouds, the vast white Saturday afternoon,
And the high mournful whistle crying, *noon, noon.*

—*Donald Justice*

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Theater

Summertime

by Mark Steyn

As the delights of the fall season crowd around, memories of summer slowly fade. I find it harder than ever to believe I really saw, at a respected, nationally acclaimed theater (Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House), Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas singing a duet. Not just singing, but dancing, too. And not just any old number, but one of the treasures of the American songbook, "On the Sunny Side of the Street":

> Grab your coat and get your hat
> Leave your worries on the doorstep
> Just direct your feet
> To the Sunny Side of the Street
>
> Can't you hear that pitter-pat?
> Oh, that happy tune is your step
> Life can be so sweet
> On the Sunny Side of the Street . . .

They're big, fat, clean words that bounce off the notes and pass into the language: I recall, a couple of years back, seeing a cartoon of a glass case next to an elevator with a sign saying, "In case of fire, grab your coat and get your hat, leave your worries on the doorstep." It's not Gertrude Stein, of course. She was an occasional lyricist—she wrote words to Virgil Thomson's music for *Four Saints in Three Acts*. But she'd never have bothered rhyming across the quatrains like that: hat/pat, doorstep/your step . . . That's the unobtrusive precision of Dorothy Fields, a much better writer in my view.

As to what Gertrude and Alice B. were doing "On the Sunny Side of the Street," it cropped up in Sherman Yellen's *Lucky in the Rain*, a foursquare musical comedy meant to evoke the Paris of the 1920s but coming closer to evoking the Dubuque of the 1920s. There is nothing postmodern or ironic about the Stein-Toklas duet. Yellen is a longtime Broadway also-ran who hit paydirt with a couple of sketches in *Oh, Calcutta!*, but who apparently believes, in all seriousness, that "The Sunny Side of the Street" is an authentic, plausible, dramatic characterization of these women in song. The score for *Lucky in the Rain* uses mainly the catalogue of Jimmy McHugh, composer of "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." But why? It's a great catalogue, but it doesn't have anything to do with Paris, where the show's set, or with Isadora Duncan, Josephine Baker, and the other real-life figures in the dramatis personae. Maybe all the viable compilation shows have been done, and the computer is now just throwing out random combinations: Gertrude Stein does Dorothy Fields, Albert Einstein does W. C. Fields, etc.

But that wasn't the low point of the summer. No, sir. Every now and then, as we stagger through what's left of the American theater, it's useful to be reminded that things could be worse. I last came across Götz Friedrich when he brought to Covent Garden his celebrated "tube tunnel" *Ring* cycle—that's to say, it was staged on a set

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that looked like one of the danker shafts of the London Underground. I forget the rationale behind this "concept," though doubtless there was one. But I do remember Dame Gywneth Jones being squeezed into a black leather biker-gal get-up, and marveling at the humiliations Friedrich was willing to heap upon his principals. After that, he was supposed to be directing a musical about Martin Luther King, Jr. But, like Jack Briley (screenwriter of *Gandhi*, and briefly the show's librettist) and Maya Angelou (poet, and briefly the show's lyricist) and many others who worked on *King* for a day, he found it politic, faced with the tense relationship between the King Center in Atlanta and the British production team, to withdraw—in his case, on health grounds.

Mrs. King and the King Center's objection to the likes of Herr Friedrich was that no well-meaning overseas Caucasian could truly understand the African-American experience. I was pretty dismissive of that thinking back then, but, on the evidence of Friedrich's summer production of *Porgy and Bess*, Mrs. King was absolutely right. Given the opportunity to stage the piece at Austria's Bregenz Festival, Friedrich decided it was about a "social earthquake," a place beyond communication, where the fabric of society has been irrevocably torn apart—in other words, today's black urban American ghetto. So goodbye, Catfish Row; hello, South Central Los Angeles. In the spectacular lakeside setting of Bregenz, Friedrich had constructed a huge, shattered L.A. freeway, towering over everything in sight. As in almost all Friedrich productions, it was both excruciatingly ugly and extraneous.

This was made plain the moment the music started—or, more accurately, the Gershwin music. George and Ira, it seems, weren't enough for Friedrich, so he took it upon himself to interpolate some (what else?) African drums to enliven the opening. Eventually, however, the Gershwin got going, and from the very first song the horror of what Friedrich had wrought was clear. "Summertime," George and DuBose Heyward's lovely languorous lullaby of descending fifths and minor thirds, is one of the best opening numbers ever written. It doesn't establish character or kick-start the plot, but it draws you immediately into the atmosphere of Catfish Row, Charleston. That's important: Catfish Row is virtually a character within the drama, and so Gershwin and Heyward define it as they would anyone else in the play. The song, sung by Clara to her baby, is a cocoon—as the community of Catfish Row strives to be. It has a spiritual quality—brought out especially in the choral crooning—but it's also freighted by a wistful melancholy and the certainty, even as it luxuriates in a lazy stillness, that summer will prove all too fleeting.

It is difficult to imagine what degree of tin ear is necessary to hear even two bars of this song and think it could ever serve as a scene-setter for post-Rodney King race riots. Only someone willfully obtuse could blunder on, as Friedrich does, imposing his gangsta rap visuals on a score that has nothing to do with them. His so-called director's "vision" reduces much of the show to the same rubble as the set: "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York," for example, makes sense sung by Sportin' Life to Bess in Catfish Row; its strutting brass is a twin seduction—the pimp's of a vulnerable woman, but also urban life and all its possibilities over an entire community. All of that disappears if Sportin' Life is merely inviting Bess to exchange one devastated urban wasteland for another. No wonder, when Porgy sets off for New York to look for Bess, Friedrich thought he needed to distract the eyes of his audience fifty feet above the lake to a huge banner of a clenched black fist.

Any regular theatergoer or operagoer eventually becomes desensitized to directorial assaults on the classics—when *Richard III* is shoehorned awkwardly into Mobuto's Zaire or wherever. But I've never seen a more brutal and moronic transposition than this one. For one thing, while opera tends to the general, the best musicals are both specific and universal—a combination of

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words and music in which the specifics of the former are universalized by the latter: you cannot so easily uproot something that is Southern, semirural, and isolated and expect it suddenly to become Western, urban, streetwise. For another, Friedrich's fatuous observations on America's racial divide belie an exquisite condescension: he assumes that there can only ever be one story to tell about race in America—one of black alienation, social disintegration, etc. Heyward and the Gershwins' subtle and particular story is, in every sense, beyond him.

And yet somehow Friedrich has become one of the most celebrated directors in continental Europe. He couldn't even spare the time to attend any performances of *Porgy* because he had to dash back to Berlin to pursue new thrills with the Deutsche Oper. The almost two hundred thousand people who, unlike Friedrich, could find the time to take in a performance at Bregenz could only marvel: the production cost twenty-one million dollars—twice as much as the most lavish Broadway musical. Most of the big-ticket items seemed to have been ordered mainly to obliterate the music—literally so in the case of Friedrich's police motor boat which roared across the lake, sirens wailing, at the end of that first scene. Twenty-one million for an idiotic travesty.

The Bregenz Festival is drowning in millions of dollars of subsidies from every level of government. If, as NEA supporters argue, funding the arts is the mark of a civilized society, then Austria, like most Central European countries, is eminently civilized. About five years ago, the Theater an der Wien, which introduced the world to *The Magic Flute*, *Die Fledermaus*, and many more, decided that it was tired of being just another stop on the tour for British mega-musicals and was going to reestablish itself as the flagship for Viennese musical drama. Their first project was a rock opera called *Freudiana*, about you know who. Not only did the state and city subsidize a spectacular production, they also were able, when the Viennese declined to buy tickets, to go out into the country to the outlying factories and give the workers the afternoon off to attend matinees, with special buses laid on to take them into town and out again. As the late shah of Iran once remarked, "Ingratitude is the prerogative of the people." And sure enough, the ungrateful masses, despite free seats, declined to rave.

If you measure the success of arts funding by the art it produces, then clearly the Austrian system—like Germany's—is a colossal flop. The justification for subsidy is that it offers what its beneficiaries call "the right to fail"—i.e., the right to attempt bold, experimental work without having to fret about commercial pressures. Critics of the system more accurately characterize it as "the right *not* to fail"—the creation of a cozy system which insulates and indulges the artist. But, as much as that, it's a right not to succeed. No good plays emerge from Austria or Germany. How can they? Good, bad, or indifferent, they play out their allotted number of performances and then have to make way for whatever revival has been slotted in next. All heavily subsidized theaters wind up becoming directors' clubs. And, as Götz Friedrich exemplifies all too well, the ease of access to the classics has bred a kind of contempt in their stagers. You'd have to be the most sensitive director in the world to blow twenty-one million dollars on *Porgy and Bess* and not utterly destroy it. There is a culture of decadence in Continental drama that anyone who believes in a living, breathing theater would find repugnant. It's revealing that the Continent provides a reliably lucrative bolthole for the most exhibitionist American directors, among them Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson (whose rock opera *Time Rocker*, with songs by Lou Reed, was seen in Europe well before its U.S. production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November).

The exception to this rule is Britain, which, for complex reasons, has managed to retain an almost obscenely successful commercial theater alongside a continuously pressurized subsidized sector. As an example of how to stage a riot without spending twenty-one

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million dollars, I'd commend *Goliath* at the Bush in West London. This is the latest in the school of one-woman riots inaugurated by America's Anna Deavere Smith. In this instance, Nicola McAuliffe plays nineteen characters, from hassled cops to beleaguered pensioners, bound together by the 1991 summer riots on the nation's council estates—the British equivalent of housing projects. I passed the entire summer of '91 in Britain and have no very clear memory of these riots. But then I'm not one of the "disenfranchised," who in apparently unconnected incidents suddenly took to 'jacking cars, driving them at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, and then slamming them into store windows, not especially to loot but just as a savage indictment of Thatcher's Britain. (Technically, Thatcher had gone by then, but "Major's Britain" never had quite the same ring.) In American drama, the L.A. riots—or "uprising" or "liberation struggle" or whatever the approved term is—are usually shown to have their roots in the inherent racism and historical guilt of the white oppressor. As *Goliath* is adapted by Bryrony Lavery, a famous left-wing lesbian, from a book by Beatrix Campbell, another famous left-wing lesbian, you'd expect something similar. But, intentionally or not, and aided perhaps by Miss McAuliffe's darkly comic performance, *Goliath* emerges as a surprisingly plausible riot epic. The lads, as the British put it, don't give a toss. There are ways out of the dead-end council estates, but they'd involve doing boring things like studying accountancy, so who can be bothered? As an illumination of the bloody-minded pointlessness of the riot mentality, *Goliath* is hard to beat. Not only my favorite riot solo, but, at approximately $20,925,000 less than *Porgy and Bess*, it delivers, as they say, more bang for the buck.

Back in the American theater, we seem to be entering a murky era in which to be a Broadway producer you also have to be a Broadway theater owner. Disney is: they'll be opening their new show, *The Lion King*, in their new theater, the remodeled New Amsterdam. It's the same with Garth Drabinsky, whose *Ragtime* will open 42nd Street's new Ford Center for the Performing Arts—a boringly corporate name for an amalgam of two historic Broadway houses. But, for *Ragtime*, Drabinsky has teamed a mainstream choreographer, Graciella Danielle, with Steppenwolf's Frank Galati. Similarly, for his first venture into musicals with *The Capeman*, Paul Simon has Derek Walcott as his librettist and, as director, the choreographer Mark Morris. Even Disney, following criticism of their theme-park approach to *Beauty and the Beast*, have done a complete overhaul on Elton John and Tim Rice's *Lion King* and brought in a highly unconventional director, Julie Taymor. Will all these mixed marriages work? Probably not. But they're preferable to the stale self-indulgences and limited obsessions of Götz Friedrich and the others holed up in the European subsidy bunkers. And they're also part of a respectable Broadway tradition.

There was a reminder of that at the end of summer when one of the unlikeliest of all hit shows blew back into town. The Broadway musical sells itself as exemplifying all the youthful energy and dynamism of the great Republic. But, in fact, it doesn't have any. Most of the people who make Broadway musicals are old and, these days, pretty exhausted. The "youthfulness" of their shows is a rictus grin, a horrible fake energy that the more it pants and puffs, the less it seems to get anywhere. One of the few genuinely youthful musicals is *On the Town*, a burst of real Broadway energy from a handful of unlikely sources—a highbrow conductor, a ballet choreographer, two Greenwich Village cabaret performers, and a neophyte designer-producer. Today, it's hard to imagine what an unlikely conglomeration this must have appeared; all five are now revered as Broadway bluechips: Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, and Oliver Smith, perhaps the finest designer the New York theater's ever had. Back in 1944, they were fortunate to have the experienced

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hand of George Abbott as director, but Mr. Abbott was also shrewd enough not to mess around with the piece too much: he didn't make the mistake so many musicals make today of overstreamlining. To be sure, it has a peach of an idea: twenty-four hours in the life of New York as seen through the eyes of three sailors on leave. That would be more than enough for a conventional musical comedy. But there's nothing very conventional about *On the Town*: it has a wise-cracking book, but also long ballets; comic songs alongside extended instrumental passages, alongside eerie, affecting ballads that surely qualify, if anything does, as American art songs. The closing ballad is one of the most elegiac theater songs ever written: the three sailors returning to their ship, bidding farewell to their girls, noting all the things they never got to do, and then sighing, "Oh, well/ We'll catch up/ Some Other Time." It's one of those cunning songs that almost imperceptibly enlarges the situation. Nobody mentions the war, but it's 1944 and, at the end of an exhausting twenty-four hours, we're all aware that "Some Other Time" may never come. When I asked Mr. Abbott whether he'd calculated this larger significance, he scoffed, "We didn't think about that. We thought, 'What's funny?'" But Comden, Green, and Bernstein recalled the song's creation: they were in tryout in Boston, and, for some reason, there was nowhere to rehearse the song until they found a piano in a department store window; after they'd sung it through the first time, they suddenly realized the resonance it would have.

A stylistic coherence emerges from the show's disparate elements: binding the jokes and the dance and the poetry together is the pulse of the city, never so gorgeously caught as in Bernstein's brass and percussion. The trouble with *On the Town*, though, is that it's such a delicate balance of elements that deficiencies in any department can bring the whole thing tumbling down. That's what happened to Ron Field's 1971 revival.

The same thing doesn't quite bedevil George Wolfe's production for the New York Shakespeare Festival, but there are moments when you feel him sidling up to parts of the material, uncertain what to do with it. He has, for a start, not a young, evenly balanced ensemble, but a lopsided team in which, as Hildy the lady cab driver, Lea DeLaria, a popular heavy on the lesbian stand-up circuit, is allowed at times to wrestle the rest of the show to the ground. On the plus side, Adrianne Lobel's sets are entrancing, especially the hundred-and-twenty-foot steel bridge that, alfresco at the Delacorte, is everything Friedrich's crumbling L.A. freeway isn't: it both frames Central Park behind beautifully and also draws the city down on top of us. Smith's designs were ravishing, an important contribution to the sense that the show was a valentine to New York. Lobel's are less a valentine, more a series of tourist postcards, but they're witty and touching.

Where the show falls down is in the dance passages. They're long, but, as staged by Robbins, they both kept the momentum of the book going and transported it into depths of emotion far beyond Comden and Green's gagfest dialogue. Wolfe has entrusted the ballets to Eliot Feld, a non-Broadway choreographer, and the best that can be said is that he hasn't yet grasped how to propel plot through a number, as well as reveal character. The dances are curiously static, as if everyone's just hanging around, killing time. And, unlike Robbins, he's hung up on steps: instead of movement that seems to grow organically from character, you find yourself noticing a lot of generic, stylized shoulder rolls.

The more time I spend with the score of *On the Town*, the more I think it's Bernstein's finest for the theater. Like Kern writing with Wodehouse three decades earlier, the combination of a serious composer with joyously playful lyricists produced a special, uniquely American musical vernacular, both conversational and profound. Wolfe's production will have to do for now. But I would love to see a staging that did justice to every aspect of the show. Oh, well, some other time . . .

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Art

Cambodia comes to Washington

by Karen Wilkin

"Cambodia," for as long as I can remember, has been a word associated mainly with political strife. In recent years, its cognate, "Khmer," was linked most often, horrifyingly, with "Rouge." Another close relative, "Angkor," on the other hand, signaled a place of mystery, a city of towers and tumbled stones, gripped by the roots of voracious jungle growth. Angkor was remote and fascinating, like Petra or Baalbek or Machu Pichu, a ruined architectural marvel that I hoped, vaguely, to visit one day. But apart from my general sense of the architecture of Angkor Vat, these loaded words existed for me unaccompanied by images of what Cambodian art looked like.

I was made forcibly aware of this gap in my knowledge by the Brancusi retrospective two years ago—specifically, by the stunning group of economical, ambiguous torsos in the Paris installation—which jarred loose the dimly remembered fact that Brancusi had admired Cambodian sculpture. When my mental image bank failed to come up with anything useful for comparison, I resolved to visit the Asian art museum in Paris. I remembered my resolution only this past spring, when I arrived at the Gare du Nord to find Paris covered with banners for a great exhibition of "l'Art Khmer" at the Grand Palais. Several visits revealed how abysmally little I knew, but also helped make up for courses not taken; this summer's substantially different, but equally choice version of the exhibit, "Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory,"[1] at the National Gallery, Washington, continued my education. The Brancusi connection now makes sense.

I also feel slightly less embarrassed by my ignorance, since I have learned that I am probably not alone. Even the organizers of the show admit that while Cambodian architecture has penetrated the American public consciousness to some degree—witness my image of Angkor Vat—other aspects of Khmer art are little known here, as they are in most places outside of Asia. It's not entirely our fault. The most significant collections of Cambodian sculpture are to be found in the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, and the Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris. The Washington show, which brings together rare examples from both collections, some of which have never before been lent,

1 "Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on June 29, 1997, and closed on September 28. The exhibition was first seen at the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (January 31–May 26, 1997), and it will travel to the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (October 28–December 21, 1997) and the Osaka Municipal Museum of Art (January 15–March 22, 1998). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Helen Ibbitson Jessup and Thierry Zéphir, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and Thames and Hudson (381 pages, $80; $45 paper).

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is the first major exhibition of such work ever seen in the U.S. (Additional works in Washington came from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, New York's Asia Society, and from the Asian art museums of San Francisco and Berlin.)

A joint effort of the National Gallery, the Royal Government of Cambodia, and the Musée Guimet, the show is a direct result of an improved political situation and peace accords that have permitted such international collaborative ventures. Yes, there is undoubtedly political hay being made from the exhibition. The catalogue begins not with the usual gracious thanks extended by the directors of the organizing museums to lenders, funders, and other such invaluable individuals and institutions, but with letters of mutual esteem and gratitude signed by the King of Cambodia, Jacques Chirac, and Bill Clinton.

The show, however, provided more than enough to think about in purely aesthetic terms to overshadow any political concerns. Not that Cambodia's long history isn't immensely complicated and fraught with intrigue. The catalogue makes this clear in a generally excellent section tracing relevant events in the region from the paleolithic era to the period coinciding with the European Renaissance—with some delicately phrased discussion of more recent happenings. A comparative time line helpfully sets significant moments in Khmer history in a world context; it's fascinating—and useful—to be reminded, for example, that the relocation of the Khmer capital from Angkor to the south, in 1431, occurred not only while Brunelleschi was at work on the Duomo of Florence, but during the height of Inca power.

In Washington, as in Paris, the show focused on sculptures, most of them about life size, most of them in stone, plus smaller bronzes, from the sixth through the sixteenth centuries. Virtually all of the works in the show were royal, religious, or both, made for Hindu or Buddhist sanctuaries and temples. (Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted peacefully in Cambodia—as did the written languages of Sanskrit and Khmer—with the rulers espousing Hinduism until the twelfth century, when they became Buddhists. Sanskrit ceased to be used by the thirteenth century. I said it was complicated.) The earliest sculptures in Washington, from the so-called Pre-Angkor period—the sixth to the ninth centuries—documented the gradual emergence of a distinctive Cambodian style from a synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist influences.

At the heart of the show were sculptures and architectural fragments from the Angkor period—roughly five hundred years of what the catalogue describes as "religious toleration and stylistic synthesis," lasting from the ninth century, when the capital was established at Angkor, to the early fifteenth century, when the vast complex of palaces and temples was abandoned after repeated Thai raids. (The time line reminds us that the founder of the Angkor dynasty, Jayavarman II, began his reign in 802, two years after Charlemagne's coronation.) At the apex of Khmer power, Angkor's rule extended to most of what is now Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Few artifacts survive dating later than the early fifteenth century—"cultural production had apparently come to a standstill . . . when the court retreated south," the catalogue modishly notes—although the substitution of perishable materials such as wood, instead of enduring stone or bronze, for "cultural production" may account for some of the paucity. In Washington, a single carving of a worshiper, in wood, was emblematic of the Post-Angkor period, after the shift of the center of Khmer culture in 1431.

In many ways, the earliest—Pre-Angkor—works in the show, largely dating from the seventh century, were the most seductive and the most appealing; their essentially reductive forms were enlivened by the influence of Indian figure sculpture, with its sinuous curves, its complicated contraposto, and its opulent, boneless fleshiness. But the extreme simplification and refinement of the Khmer sculptures also bore witness to dis-

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tinctive, cooler, aesthetic values. The hourglass torso, full breasts, and slightly shifted hips of a statue of the Hindu goddess Durgai, for example, were obviously indebted to Indian prototypes, but the restraint and smoothness of the forms were unfamiliar. The voluptuous, albeit headless and armless, Durgai seemed static, almost frozen, despite the thrust of one gently bent leg through her skirt and the sway of its folds. Male figures from the same period shared this distinctive mixture of sensuality and discipline, their frontal poses and symmetrical gestures animated by slight *dehanchements* and almost imperceptible shifts of weight from one sturdy leg to the other. Yet no matter how subtly inflected the bodies, the faces were uniformly impenetrable, with blank expressions and downcast eyes belying the promise of sensual, full lips.

But the symmetry and incipient rigidity of these early works prove to be what defines them as Cambodian. In a curious evolution that reverses Western conceptions of development from the archaic to the naturalistic, Khmer figure sculpture seems to move away from the relatively free, relatively naturalistic, Indian-influenced approach manifest in the Pre-Angkor era toward the more highly conceptualized, rigid style of the Angkor period. The sways and curves of Indian style stiffen and largely disappear from Khmer sculpture. Subtle swells of flesh and tilted hips are supplanted by foursquare frontality, strict right-left balance, and increasingly severe modeling. Even when Khmer artists depict a many-armed Hindu god, they manage to line everything up neatly, merging the upper arms on each side so as to disturb an orderly arrangement of forms as little as possible. (The rear view of such figures is surprisingly lively; the arched back implied by the thickened mass of "extra" limbs suggests that the figure is tense and poised for action.)

As Khmer sculptures become more static, their proportions change as well. With few exceptions, the slender, long-limbed bodies of early Pre-Angkor divinities gradually thicken; figures become chunkier with proportionately larger heads. This evolution, once again, reverses the usual course of things in the Western canon—the shift, for example, from the sturdy body type of Archaic Greek *kouroi* to the elegant attentuations of Hellenistic heroes and gods. By the Angkor period, suave modeling and unyielding symmetry of fairly solid-looking figures are the dominant characteristics of Khmer sculpture, but the restraint this implies is often outweighed by increasingly florid surface decoration and rich patterning. Sculptured divinities are adorned with carefully worked relief crowns, jewelry, and belts whose complicated twists hold in place densely pleated *dhotis* and skirts; carved stone lintels turn into lace.

It's often impossible to tell, apart from specific iconographic differences or particular attributes, whether a Khmer work is Buddhist or Hindu. The elongated earlobes you associate with images of the Buddha or with the Bodhisattvas appear on Vishnu. Krishna's hair is dressed in the flat curls typical of representations of the Buddha. Both Buddhas and Hindu deities sport elegant moustaches, while the Buddhist image of the Naga—a giant snake whose coiled body forms a seat for the meditating Buddha and whose hooded heads form a protective canopy for him—appears in monumental form as a guardian in Angkor's Hindu temples, rearing its multiple heads by gateways and running its immense body along the tops of walls and railings, to protect the entrances. (Just to confuse things further, in some images of the Naga, those clustered heads look more like a bouquet of toothy, pig-snouted Chinese dragons than a bunch of fanged snakes.) It's rather like that ambiguous moment when Early Christian and late Pagan art overlapped and a mosaic portrait of a beautiful young man in a horse-drawn chariot could be transformed instantly from Apollo to Christ by the addition of a halo.

Such overlaps of imagery and form, such evidence of complex cross-fertilization not-

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withstanding, the cumulative effect of the selection in Washington was to suggest that the essence of Cambodian style was its solemn frontality and its sense of inwardness, of self-containment. In the end, what was most compelling about the best of the sculptures was the subtlety of their modeling, the sensitivity with which a Khmer carver coaxed a torso out of a columnar shaft of stone—which is what Brancusi picked up on—or the breathtaking delicacy with which he incised the folds of a *dhoti* or the curves of a knotted belt or the scroll of an inscrutable smile.

Part of the pleasure of such nuances was not only that they were marvels of pure carving, but that, like the subtle sways and imbalances of Pre-Angkor sculptures, they provided relief from the relentless bilateral symmetry of the majority of the sculptures. The left-right balance of most Khmer sculptures is so carefully calibrated that they can seem planar, almost two-dimensional. (It was shocking to discover, in sculpture after sculpture, that the side view of an apparently flat figure was really a swelling arc, curving from head to foot.) Any break in the continuity of the frontal plane, however slight, became overwhelmingly important. The shallow relief of a decorative waistband could be enthralling, a hand reaching forward, no matter how ritualized the gesture, electrifying. I suspect that the best Cambodian sculptors were well aware of this. In the Angkor period, as forms became more stylized and stiffer, motifs that earlier were treated as decorative surface elaborations often were handled as "transgressive" sculptural elements in their own right. A robustly projecting fan of pleats or a projecting knot could not only enhance the swell of a stomach, but offer welcome contrast to a schematic body.

Throughout the show, there were extraordinary sculptures that defied the prevailing sense of calm and balance. From the Pre-Angkor period there was an enchanting pot-bellied Ganesha, the elephant-headed god known as "protector of new enterprises and surmounter of obstacles," and a horse-headed divinity, probably an aspect of Vishnu, whose pared-down curves and elegant carving made him, improbably, seem a cousin of the animal-headed gods of Egypt. (A later, Angkor-period version of the same creature showed him with a fetching, elaborately decorated crown, neatly perched between his ears.) Most dramatic was a Pre-Angkor high relief of Krishna, showing the young god reaching his left arm high above his head and bracing his right hand against his thigh as he lifts a mountain to protect cattle herders and their charges from a storm. The sculpture would have been arresting anywhere, but amid the stylizations and symmetry of the majority of works in the show, the casualness, energy, and irregularity of the pose was downright astonishing.

The athleticism of the relief of Krishna, however, was explainable by its being an extremely early work, when Indian influence was less diluted by the growing Khmer taste for stillness and order. More surprising—as dazzling in Washington as it had been in Paris—was a fragmented pair of wrestlers, their arms and legs interlocked, and their torsos closely pressed as though united by the memory of the original block of stone; only the fragile relief rendering of pleated loincloths and jewels calmed the fierceness of their struggle. The vitality of this remarkable work is thought to be testimony to a brief, aberrant moment in the history of Khmer sculpture, when, in the early tenth century, the uncle of two previous kings claimed the throne, built his own capital fifty miles north of Angkor, and apparently encouraged art that evoked movement more explicitly than court art of the period usually did.

Although the uninhibited gestures of Krishna and the tightly joined wrestlers were nearly unrivaled in Washington, there were plenty of other notable works: the surviving head and shoulders of a huge reclining Vishnu "sleeping the cosmic sleep," for example. The original figure was at least twenty feet long—a miracle of

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eleventh century bronze technology. Just as the contained energy of the wrestlers' group was probably enhanced by the sculpture's having been reduced to a focused knot of tense limbs, the bronze Vishnu was, I suspect, improved by its truncated, weathered state, although a twelfth century Chinese envoy's description of the sculpture as a fountain with water flowing from its navel is, to say the least, suggestive.

Even more potent was a small bronze female figure, one of the few secular sculptures in the show and apparently (with good reason) one of the most celebrated. Cast in the early twelfth century, the figure kneels with one knee raised, as though about to stand, with her erect, bare-breasted torso and her inwardly turned supporting foot suggesting an energetic upward thrust. The upraised arms of this ravishing figure may have supported a mirror, but whatever its original function, the subtly modulated, powerfully three-dimensional little bronze was one of the most unforgettable works in the show.

For sheer sculptural accomplishment, the little bronze mirror base could have held its own anywhere. Equally distinguished and perhaps even more evocative of a particular place and a particular culture was a group of fragments from the tenth-century temple complex of Banteay Srei, which is considered to be one of the masterworks of Khmer architecture and decoration. Tantalizing proof of the accuracy of that assertion was provided by a pair of rose sandstone pediments—removed for safekeeping, we were told reassuringly, from buildings too damaged to be restored—with delicate, flamelike edges framing shallow niches in which scenes from the *Mahabharata* were enacted with an elegance and unexpectedness of composition that rewarded close attention. A group of grotesque crouching guardian figures from the same temple, each with a human body and the head—and sometimes feet—of a different fantastic creature, added to the effect. Their poses were similar to that of the bronze figure designed to hold the mirror, but lacked her vigor and tension; the relaxed angle of their raised knees and splayed supporting feet made it clear that the temple guardians were seated comfortably and unlikely to move any time soon.

The works from Banteay Srei brought home the uncomfortable fact that almost all the works in the show had been detached from specific contexts, an inescapable reality in any undertaking of this nature that nevertheless provokes innumerable questions. How, for example, can a museum show convey the richness, scale, and three-dimensional complexity of the buildings and courtyards from which these eloquent fragments have been wrenched? Would seeing the sculptures *in situ* change our perceptions of them? Might the rigidity of Khmer sculpture seem less oppressive if the frontal, symmetrical figures could be seen in their intended settings? And so on. How do the sculptures mediate between the individual and the monumental bulk of the temple complex? (Let's leave aside the question of gilding and the possibility that when they were new, these chaste works were as gaudy as we are told Greek sculpture was when it still retained its polychromy.)

The catalogue does its best to address such questions, as well as to raise others, by providing a great deal of practical information—plans, photographs, aerial photos—along with its intelligent discussions of context in both the essays and the entries for individual works. As well, the Washington installation made a valiant effort to remind visitors of where these sculptures belonged, through photomurals and blow-ups of early engravings of Angkor in appropriate places. A short video at the end of the show was even more helpful, since it combined both old and new footage of Cambodian sites, along with vintage films of dancers, rice fields, elephants, and other images depicted in the exhibition's statues and reliefs. It was instructive, too, to be shown saffron-robed pilgrims climbing the steps of the towers, a graphic reminder that Angkor Vat remains a place of pilgrimage

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and worship. This absorbing image also provided an instant sense of scale that no description, plan, or photo could equal. But why did the makers of this informative film think it appropriate to have quotations from celebrated French and Chinese visitors to Angkor read by actors with French and Chinese accents? It seemed slightly insulting, very tacky, and, I should think, extremely incorrect, these days.

The exhibition ended diminuendo, but eloquently. A group of lively little bronzes of Hindu divinities, mostly from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including vigorous, multi-armed dancers whose energy transcended their small size, bore witness to the persistence and, at the same time, the diminishing importance of Hinduism in the period when the rulers of Cambodia embraced Buddhism as their official religion. The supernatural calm of the Buddhist images at the end of the show was heightened, by contrast. Most engaging, perhaps, were a pair of near life-sized heads from the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries. Presumed portraits of Jayavarman VII, who was famous for his devotion to Buddhist ideals, the heads were both archetypical and suffused with an aura of individuality. The topknot and distended earlobes, the slightly self-satisfied smile and downcast eyes were what we expect of an image of the Buddha, but the blunt features and the poise of the head seemed that of a real person; for once the expression seemed not so much closed as introspective.

In Washington, the final work in the show was a slender figure of a kneeling worshiper, from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, carved in wood. At once naturalistic and schematic, this sole example of Post-Angkor art seemed more closely related to high-level naïve art than to the stylized, formal court sculptures in stone that preceded it, provoking thoughts about decadence and change. This wistful subtext is echoed by the ending of the catalogue discussion of this work, the final entry in the volume. In a masterpiece of understatement, the author, Son Soubert, writes: "The former grand vision of the divine, embodied in the imposing monuments of Angkor, have given way to a natural modesty in which man is the measure. Paradoxically enough, mildness has gone hand in hand in Cambodia with an uncertain political future."

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Dance

Frederick Ashton's England

by Laura Jacobs

The biggest dance event of the 1997 spring season was the publication of a book: Julie Kavanagh's *Secret Muses: The Life of Frederick Ashton*.[1] The whispering chorus of kudos began last fall, when a lucky few New Yorkers got advance copies out of England, where the book was first published. Everything about *Secret Muses* felt right: Kavanagh had herself been a dancer, so there was understanding; she'd had Ashton's trust (and intimate chat) far beyond the extent he was willing to trust (and intimately chat with) any other journalist; and she'd been patient—the book was ten years in its meticulous making. It didn't hurt that Kavanagh made no pretense for her book as critical biography. While there are many passages in which she discusses Ashton's ballets, offering perspectives that new biographical data have brought into view, she never gets revisionist or self-righteous, sure ways to trigger the competitive instincts of critics. A tour de force of warmth, wit, and love for its subject, Kavanagh's book is, in a word, Ashtonian.

The timing was right, too. For New York City balletomanes, watching with exhaustion and ennui as the spirit of George Balanchine wanes at the New York City Ballet, *Secret Muses* arrived as an absorbing break from our own ballet problem. Or rather, it was a chance to ponder somebody else's problem, in this case, the waning spirit of Frederick Ashton at the Royal Ballet. When—as if on cue—the Royal Ballet landed at the Metropolitan Opera House for two weeks in July, comparison was in the air.[2] And not just because the Royal could boast only one true-blue ballerina, Darcey Bussell, a dancer the company sometimes shares with the New York City Ballet (guest ballerinas have become a norm at NYCB, where the top of the roster is perilously thin). And not just because the Royal brought Ashton's *La Valse*, a work from 1958 that one couldn't help measuring against Balanchine's *La Valse* of 1951.

It is hard to read of Ashton's life and achievement in *Secret Muses* (those muses, not so secret within the ballet world, tended to be male dancers) without feeling the invisible pressure and standard of George Balanchine just across the pond. Both Ashton and Balanchine were born in 1904. Both revered Marius Petipa, choreographer of the Russian Imperial Ballet (Petipa died in 1910), and claimed Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* as a touchstone in life and art. Both men were the founding choreographers for definitive new ballet companies: Ashton,

1 *Secret Muses: The Life of Frederick Ashton*, by Julie Kavanagh; Pantheon, 647 pages, $35.

2 The Royal Ballet performed *Cinderella*, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, and a program set to music by Ravel (*La Valse*, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, *La Fin du jour*, *Daphnis and Chloë*) at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, from July 18, 1997, through July 27.

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with director Ninette de Valois, was the root of Sadler's Wells Ballet, which became the Royal Ballet; Balanchine, with Lincoln Kirstein, was the soul of the New York City Ballet. And both men died in the 1980s, each surname symbolic of a classical style of dancing that is now in jeopardy. Their ascents through the Thirties, the Forties, the Fifties, fly side by side. If Ashton became a national hero in England sooner than Balanchine did in America, Balanchine ascended higher, died at the helm of his company, and never had to see where it would go without him. Not so lucky, Ashton was replaced by choreographer Kenneth MacMillan in 1970, and his spotty representation in Royal repertory during the Eighties and Nineties remains a blot on the company. (In New York, audiences have always hungered for Ashton, the only contemporary on Balanchine's poetic level. It was a glorious collection of Ashton ballets that lent the Joffrey Ballet its magic in the Eighties.)

As for the differences between the two choreographers: Balanchine was Russian and heterosexual; Ashton, English and homosexual. Reviewing *Secret Muses* in *The New Yorker*, Arlene Croce writes, "the biggest difference between the two choreographers was the emphasis that Ashton gave to the female upper body and Balanchine to the lower. Balanchine thought that a woman's expressive power was mainly in her legs and pelvis, Ashton in her head, upper back, and shoulders." This difference, Croce deduces, "betrayed their sexual orientation." As much as I like the neatness of Croce's hypothesis, it does seem a tad reductive, like saying the resolution of themes in Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony proves he's gay. Yes, Balanchine concentrated on lower body power and expression, and yes, Ashton was often caught up in the halo of *épaulement*. This difference, however, seems to me less one of sexual orientation (both men were, after all, unabashed romantics, serially infatuated fools-for-love) than of differing footholds on classical dance, i.e., their training.

Ashton said this much himself in 1964 when, in a review of Bernard Taper's book *Balanchine*, he wrote:

> Balanchine has had all the necessary environment and background for the making of the great choreographer that he is. Unlike myself, who had to make all my opportunities from the beginning, and fight my way against every kind of prejudice in order to be allowed to dance. . . . all the Russian fairies must have gathered at his christening to bestow on him all his great gifts.

Balanchine was practically born to ballet, taken into the Imperial School at age nine, whereas Ashton, having at thirteen seen Anna Pavlova perform ("She injected me with her poison and from the end of that evening I wanted to dance"), had to wait until he was twenty to take his first lesson. As anyone who has ever studied ballet knows, legs and feet are hardest and must be learned young. You can finesse the arms, but you can never fake legs. Ballet legs are conceptually complex—an energy flow that must move fast and free between hip and toe, a flow that is fired in the torque of turnout, which is born in the pelvic bowl. Ashton didn't have ballet in his body the way Balanchine did—a consummation as metaphysical as it is muscular (a consummation Ashton devoutly wished). He compensated with imagination, with stylish *port de bras*, and with ballets that were often heavily scripted, their clever, edgy librettos written by Edith Sitwell and Gertrude Stein.

Indeed, Ashton's ballets are often quite pointed, full of elaborate punctuation and exclamation. While Balanchine, from the beginning, understood the pointe as a form of divination, a key into ether (in the first bars of *Serenade*, when the stage of seventeen women snap their toes open into first position, you feel as if the lock on eternity has sprung), an Ashton pointe was an end in itself, a still point of perfection (in Ashton's *Cinderella*, Act Two ends with a rich,

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Leonardo-esque web of stage perspectives, lines and eyes of dancers all aimed toward Cinderella's empty pink-satin pointe shoe, symbol of *la danse*). Balanchine knew ballet from the inside out. Ashton was working from the outside in, trying to fill that shoe.

Look to 1946, a breakthrough year for both choreographers—but what different breakthroughs! Balanchine created *The Four Temperaments*, a ballet to Hindemith that seemed to burst out of nowhere, unprecedented in Balanchine's canon and in all of ballet. It begins with a man and woman standing side by side like Adam and Eve. They present their pointed toes, then, in a spasm of knowledge, they flex them. Those fierce feet lead them into maelstroms, into a syntactical hall of mirrors, into modernism, pelvis following in thrusts and swoons and sidlings. The *4T*s is a ballet of sandstorms and scientific weights and measures (even its abbreviation sounds like a mathematical formula). Its dancers are outside ballet's Eden, searching among the sphinxes.

Meanwhile, over in England, Ashton premiered *Symphonic Variations*, and then staged his heraldic *Sleeping Beauty*. These ballets did not dive into chaos, they were acts of conservation, containment. It helps to remember that America, where Balanchine was, had dropped the atom bomb in 1945. England, meantime, was living with unexploded shells in London gardens. While Balanchine was splitting anatomical atoms, Ashton was writing his first great couplets with the kind of classical transparency he'd longed for. He was entering the enchanted circle. (Those two versions of *La Valse* suggest this difference. Both men hear Ravel driving toward oblivion, both ballets are costumed in doomy chic. But Ashton refuses to break out of his ballroom. He gives us Ravel's "whirling crowd" in ravishing washes, while Balanchine pierces the darkness, plunges into horror.)

In other words, in 1946 Balanchine was actively breaking rules and making his own—opening the hip, moving weight off the heel—while Ashton was only just attaining the rules, which he adored as only an outsider can. He loved the planes of classicism: the fixed directions of the body on stage (there are eight), the well-anchored fifth position, the very square attitude, the golden mean of the low arabesque. It is this continuing eye contact with classical proportion that imbues Ashton ballets with their delicate equilibrium, their secret moral imperative, as if ballet was worth dying for. "Choreography is my whole being, my whole life, my reason for living," Ashton once told writer David Vaughan. Living for, dying for—it is the same thing. And so English. This is what Ashton's postwar ballets of 1946—*Symphonic Variations* and *The Sleeping Beauty*—so achingly express.

The Royal Ballet came to New York as part of the summer's Lincoln Center Festival, and presented a sort of bookends approach to English ballet. It opened with the late Sir Kenneth MacMillan's final full-length work, *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1989), proceeded to the first full-length classical ballet ever staged by a British choreographer, Ashton's *Cinderella* of 1948, and dropped in an all-Ravel evening of repertory, works by Ashton, MacMillan, and budding choreographer Christopher Wheeldon.

Cinderella was a revelation. A few years ago, there was a rash of *Cinderella*s in town—feminist versions, Nureyev's Hollywood production, *Pretty Woman*—the usual attempts to make it Relevant. Instinct sent me in search of Ashton, and I found a very old, black-and-white tape of the ballet with Ashton and Robert Helpmann as the stepsisters, and Margot Fonteyn as Cinderella. I've never forgotten the hopefulness of Ashton's shy sister, her long horse face and Sun King wig, the jiggly precision of her big-bosomed, pebble-sized steps. Nor had I forgotten the unadorned fantasy of Cinderella's solos. Where other productions layer on the cuteness, undermining Cinderella's moments alone by casting dancers as her cat or broom-come-to-life or you name it, Ashton has her tie a rag to the broom and dance lovingly with it (the rag is the arms) until she throws it down in frus-

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tration and self-pity—returning to it minutes later, hopeful once more.

Ashton has taken the episodic, even abrupt, Prokofiev score and given it a sensation of glide, perhaps by answering its moody shifts with such sure theatricality. The scurrying, squabbling Abbott-and-Costello act of the stepsisters—a pair portrayed as grotesquely lewd or vicious in almost every other *Cinderella* I've seen—are here slapstick of a celestial order, all the more hilarious (and poignant) because we like them so much. Whenever Cinderella's theme steals into the score, the ballet moves forward on a current of calm and longing. "To keep in a three-act ballet such a tone," Edwin Denby wrote in his review, "to sustain it without affectation or banality, shows Ashton's power, and he shows this in doing it as simply as possible, by keeping the dancing sweet." Still, sweetness does not come at the expense of invention. Corps work in *Cinderella*—the Seasons, the Hours, the Stars—is quick and brilliant, so quick and light you don't register its intricacy until a second viewing.

In his book *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets*, David Vaughan notes that at the time of its premiere, there were complaints about *Cinderella*'s finale, a pas de deux for the Prince and Cinderella that struck some as too short and not grand enough. Ashton explained that there wasn't music for a big pas de deux (as opposed to the Wedding Pas in *The Sleeping Beauty*, a ballet which clearly influenced this *Cinderella*), and, in fact, one of the immense pleasures of Ashton's ballet is that melting finale—a lingering dance back among the castle columns, which seems to occur on borrowed time. The last moments see Cinderella lifted high above the Prince's head, her leg in attitude, as he carries her up some stairs, slowly turning all the while. Beyond the stairs is an arch, and beyond the arch a midnight-blue sky, against which Cinderella's airborne attitude—the position of Mercury—spirals. It's as if she is passing from message to messenger to medium. Ashton's *Cinderella* hadn't been presented in New York in over twenty years. To see it on stage for the first time, as late as July 1997, was déjà vu: it reminded me why I love ballet.

At intermission during the company's last performance of *Cinderella*, I joined a group of critics outside. They were silent—sunstruck I thought (it was a hot, high sun)—but it turned out that they were feeling as I was, struck speechless by this luminous ballet. I wondered aloud about Royal dancing under Ashton, which I had never seen: how different did today's dancers look in *Cinderella*? The consensus: there is far less chiaroscuro today. The Ashton instrument was multi-articulated—head, shoulders, waist, hips, feet—each properly placed and planed in relation to the rest, like one of those wooden artist's models made up of spools threaded with elastic. Indeed, the "placement"—a ballet word referring to the alignment of the solar plexus over the pelvis—of Margot Fonteyn, Moira Shearer, and Antoinette Sibley (seen on tape) has always made me think of teacups in saucers being offered to the queen; the torso is a fraction forward and up. Of course, it doesn't take much eye to see that the "international style" toward which all the world's ballet companies are tending (courtesy of the global village)—a sort of fusion of Bolshoi bigness, Balanchine speed, Forsythe androgyny—is hostile to Ashton. The Ashton articulation, the Cecchetti tick-tock that lies under its pillowy aplomb, has been swept up and lost in the larger torrents of our time, in our freer, less finicky and more phenomenal approach to technique.

You can see it happening in the work of Ashton's successor, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, who maintained the Ashton footwork and quirky *épaulement* (the gold coins of English classicism), yet deeply distrusted the romance, the illusions, and instead created historically sweeping works that were the doomed and decadent flip side of fairy tales: *Romeo and Juliet, Manon, Mayerling, Anastasia*. By the time MacMillan got to *The Prince of the Pagodas*, which he fashioned as homage to *The Sleeping Beauty*, he had no

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love left. This fairy tale is formless and faithless, Aurora in the rubble, trapped in an undanceable score by Benjamin Britten (it's a ballet that wants to be an experimental opera). *Pagodas* is at its best when most Ashtonian: in the pointillist, personalized solos for Darcey Bussell, meditations that knit her steep scale to sewing-sampler footwork.

Ashton was no stranger to the decadent or nihilistic undertone. His *Les Illuminations*, choreographed for the New York City Ballet in 1950, tells the story of randy Rimbaud through sly subversions of classical clichés (corps groupings straight out of *Swan Lake*, etc.) But Ashton's sensibility was essentially positive and pastoral and communal, in the vein of Jane Austen. "It was a sweet view," writes Austen of the countryside in *Emma*, "sweet to the eye and mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright without being oppressive." She could be writing about Ashton's ballets. That landscape, that light, that enduring surround—these are as true of the abstract *Symphonic Variations* as they are of the storybook *La Fille mal gardée*. Ashton, like Austen, projects a sense of spirited enclosure. As always in great choreography, such intonations can be traced to technical mechanisms.

Ashton and Balanchine embody opposing states of grace. In ballet language, you might call these states *effacé* (shaded or open) and *croisée* (crossed). These terms do not denote steps but how the body is angled on its axis and in relation to the audience. To over-simplify, *effacé* is more loosely fixed and unbound, the step more open to the audience; in *croisée*, the body is at an oblique angle, with one leg barring our view to the other, a sort of fence between audience and dancer. Balanchine's vision as a choreographer was toward large-scale legibility, an omniscient openness, a sense of repertory as cosmos. Steps presented in *effacé* may be shaded—and Balanchine was a master of glancing shadows—but they are also freer of limb, the hips less weighted, thus allowing more height and momentum into the step, more release and flow. *Croisée* is at the heart of Ashton, his cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die dedication to ballet. *Croisée* pins the dancer to the stage, creates instant tension between the hips and the upper body. It is exquisitely precise and protected. And modest. *Croisée* is Ashton's poetic temperament, the pasture gate upon which his heroine muses, the Highbury hedge that secures the dancer within the dance. Balanchine chased his ideals (and ideal woman) into opalescent atmospheres. Ashton created idylls—that state, in the words of Schiller, "to which civilization aspires."[3]

The third choreographer represented during the Royal's Met engagement was Christopher Wheeldon, whose *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was on the all-Ravel program. Wheeldon's pedigree is interesting; it includes training at the Royal Ballet School, a brief stint with the Royal Ballet, and since 1993, membership at the New York City Ballet. In June, NYCB presented a new ballet by Wheeldon as part of its third Diamond Project, a mini-festival showcasing the work of young choreographers. Of the six premieres in the Project, it was Wheeldon's *Slavonic Dances* that brimmed with promise, that looked as if its choreographer was working from the ground up, attempting to build a ballet with interior allusions, not riding empty and amorphous trends. The music was Dvořák, and Wheeldon had still photographs by Josef Sudek projected on the cyclorama, a hint of the haunted, Old World atmosphere he was trying to conjure.

His ballet was too complicated and unfocused, however, filled with big moments that didn't satisfy. So many choreographers mistakenly equate the outlandish stunt with an event, forgetting that the kind of events we remember in ballets are those the choreographer directs our eye to—those shoots through space to sudden clarity. When Ashton's Cinderella, partnered by her prince,

3 It was Lionel Trilling, in *Beyond Culture*, who first compared Austen's England with Schiller's idyll.

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moves into an arabesque facing the back right corner of the stage, and then turns her face over her shoulder to smile at the audience, it is crushingly inclusive and happy. When Balanchine's Clara Schumann (in *Robert Schumann's "Davidsbündlertänze"*) walks in her husband's arm, looks down to see his hand on her hip and secures it there with her own hand, as if feeling for a sword, he has shown us her love in a locket. Wheeldon's *Slavonic Dances* was both imaginative and uneventful, an odd mix.

Pavane pour une infante défunte, a pas de deux from 1996, is another story: powerful beyond its means, events blossoming one after the other. *Pavane* breathes somewhere between Ashton and Balanchine. In Wheeldon's choreography for the man there is something of Balanchine's airy expansion, his watchful, waiting male. In Wheeldon's choreography for the woman—pure pulses of Ashton. She first appears to us posed like Sargent's Madame X, her torsioned stance a stay against intimacy. Her next move —*bourrées* across the stage—are instantly emotional. They emerge, escape, from that pose. A giant calla lily that is the only decor murmurs overhead of death (the child of the title?). And this man, is he her lover, her brother? She runs from him, leaves the stage; but always returns for his support. *Pavane* is an enigma variation, a ballet of containment and flight, at once Edwardian and modern. It is the best new ballet I've seen in long while: a full circle, a pact between *effacé* and *croisée*.

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The media

Diana week

by James Bowman

Like the trial of O.J. Simpson, the death and funeral of Princess Diana was one of those media events which remind us of how villagelike the global village really is. The bare facts of Diana's life and accomplishments, and of the circumstances surrounding her death, were nothing but the simplest of patterns upon which fantastical embroideries of gossip and speculation, of moral praise and censure, and of (usually) hilariously bad literary and artistic invention were woven—and woven by a communal effort in which not to take part was obscurely shaming and even antisocial. Ordinary people considered it priggish or worse on the part of a few spoilsports even to refer to the princess's moral and intellectual insignificance, except as a pastime to the trivial media that live off the contemporary cult of celebrity.

Well, ordinary people had, as they so often do, a point. For one thing, the more trivial and lightweight the media, the more commercially successful—therefore powerful, therefore heavyweight—they are. Taking an interest in Diana and those journalists who make their livings from her and other celebrities is like taking an interest in the fortunes of General Motors or IBM. In fact, it would not surprise me to learn, if such a calculation could be made, that America exports more celebrity journalism than it does either cars or computers. For another thing, the universality and fervency of the Diana phenomenon suggested that there really might be, as the masses of reporters and commentators kept assuring us there were, vast significances to be discovered in the people's evident capacity for self-identification with the princess and her passion.

To be sure, most of the significances were pure journalistic fabrications. By far the most popular of these, at least among American journalists, was the myth of a "New Britain"—a myth which began with the prime minister's emotional reaction to her death. Tony Blair picked up and popularized the epithet for Diana which seems to have been the invention of the journalist Julie Burchill: "the people's princess." Blair is the progenitor of "New Labor," landslide victors in the general election of May 1, and as such a hero to the media, among which there was already a tendency to speak of a "New Britain" as New Labor's triumphant creation. But with the death of Diana, New Britain seemed to take on a new freightage of moral, personal, and linguistic habits that promised to transform the very essence of Britishness.

Here, for instance, is how Anthony Lane, in *The New Yorker*, described what Blair had to say:

> When the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, appeared on television to pay tribute, he spoke in faltering tones, with the near-hamminess of the truly sincere. It was not a good speech—the very opposite of statesmanlike—and that is why it went down so well. He judged the

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> modern mood to a millimetre. To be fluently dignified, to give any hint of the classical rhetoric of grief, would now be deemed insulting; and that is Diana's doing. No wonder she was loved in the United States. Many Americans would consider stricken spontaneity to be the only option in these circumstances, and it has been a bizarre reversal of the great Jamesian theme to watch people in London struggling, at short notice, to shrug off the expressive habits of one nation and borrow those of another.

Certainly the American media's view of the matter would seem to bear out the truth of this observation. On television, at any rate, opinion seemed to be unanimous among reporters and commentators and the various rented "experts" and "royal watchers." that Diana's life and death were matters of transformative significance for her countrymen. The funeral, said Tom Brokaw, could almost be described as forging a "new nation" by the "coming together of classes."

Brokaw's colleague in London and the editor of *The New Yorker*, Tina Brown, agreed, comparing Diana's shindig to the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia. This was the "Flower Revolution," she said, and represented a "shedding of old reticence" and "inhibitions" among her less-Americanized fellow Britons. And this was a view of Diana's significance which was remarkably congenial to the visiting American press corps (it was less often mentioned in the British coverage). The phrase "stiff upper lip" was fished out of the journalistic word-hoard again and again to describe what these Americans found so distasteful about the old-fashioned, pre-Diana kinds of Britons, and they were most congenial to the idea that she had taught them to forsake the stiff upper for quivering lower lip.

Richard Attenborough, the actor and director, likewise said that "we're too obsessed by our wretched stiff upper lips," though I would have thought that the whole point of keeping a stiff upper lip was not to get obsessed by things. Yet Attenborough spoke for the vast majority who were obsessed with not being—as it was universally acknowledged that the royal family were—"stuffy" or "stodgy." And by the same token, no one doubted that Diana's greatest virtue and contribution to the royal family was her knack for showing her feelings. A similar point seemed to be made by her brother in his funeral oration when he spoke pointedly of the intention of the "blood family" to do all that it could to "continue the imaginative and loving way in which you were steering these two exceptional young men [i.e., the princes William and Harry] so that their souls are not simply immersed by duty and tradition, but can sing openly as you planned."

It has probably often been remarked by Britons of Lord Spencer's generation that what the royal family has too much of is duty and tradition, and what it lacks is singing souls—though perhaps an occasion for such an observation has been lacking up until now. Certainly the earl must have been right in attributing such views to Diana herself, whose public confessions of adultery and of her battles with eating disorders (Lord Spencer even managed to get a reference to these into his eulogy) were real coloratura stuff. To journalists, this kind of bogus frankness is meat and drink, and to a person the reporters and commentators seemed to think it praiseworthy in the late princess, and of a piece with her capacity for "empathy" and "compassion."

At any rate, there were plenty of American newsmen to congratulate the new Britons on how, as one NBC correspondent put it, "they have lost their stiff upper lip and found that grieving in public is not a sign of weakness but of humanity."

But it was left to Tina Brown to make the most direct connection between the twin revolutions wrought by Tony Blair and Princess Di. The funeral, for instance, was a direct contradiction of Mrs. Thatcher's famous dictum that "there is no such thing as society." Here, Miss Brown confidently asserted, noting the throngs of people turned out to mourn, was "society" indeed, and the

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numbers visible were reminiscent to her of the numbers who jammed into polling stations to hand Tony Blair his magnificent victory last May. "People feel liberated emotionally now in a way they haven't done before," she said, looking narrowly and hard-eyed at the camera. "Do you wanna make something out of it?" she seemed to be saying.

The most obvious candidates for emotional liberation, so far as the press were concerned, were the royal family. Everybody among the media folk seemed to agree that they had to change, and to change in particular with respect to their emotional reticence. Even a hesitation on this point could be fatal. NBC's Katie Couric said to Andrew Roberts, whose voice was almost the only one to be heard on the American networks with a good word to say for the royals, "Andrew Roberts, you think it [i.e., the royal family] is quite fine as it is."

"No," he said defensively, "but I think there's a good argument for people being reserved at times."

Fancy that! But the idea was heresy to Katie and her kind. More representative was good old Richard Attenborough who proclaimed himself "in favor of royalty, but we need to bring them into the next century." This, of course, was a job which had already been begun by the efforts of the late sainted princess. Andrew Morton, the "royal biographer," paid tribute to Diana's "education" of Prince William by "taking him to see down and outs, to see the homeless, to see AIDS patients" all in order to give him a "rounded view of what life is really like in Britain today, so he would be in touch with the people." Victoria Mather of *The Tatler* magazine told NBC's audience that the royal family could not go back now to being "boring and stuffy." After all, she said, "we live in an age of celebrity."

What she supposed she was saying when she said that I cannot imagine. If you live in an age of celebrity it is no longer possible to be boring and stuffy? Well, they've managed it up until now, apparently. What has changed? Miss Mather was not the only one to have taken it for granted that being any one of the bad things associated with the royal family—boring, stuffy, stodgy, reticent, unemotional—was in itself tantamount to being "out of touch" with "the people." That is the unforgivable sin. Similarly, being "in touch" with the people is the same thing as joining them in spontaneous displays of emotion. The most respectable media seemed to make similar assumptions, and R. W. Apple in *The New York Times* quoted "a prominent city businessman who knows them well" as saying that "the sensibility of the royals, and especially the younger ones, has been changed forever. They understand in a way they never have the importance of emotion. She taught them that, she and the reaction to her death. There were never many hugs in that family, you know."

The Earl Spencer, who obviously had something of his sister's talent for appealing to the media, made a similar point in his paean to the singing soul, and there was plenty of brainpower to back him up. Flora Fraser, for instance, a biographer of Queen Caroline, wrote in *The Washington Post* that Walter Bagehot's famous words about how "we must not let in the daylight upon magic" had in effect been proven wrong by the bewitching princess. "Diana threw open all the curtains, and it seemed more magical than ever!" Some, of course, might say that that was an illusion. Her own aura, it is true, increased, but the effect on the royal family, as an institution whose very *raison d'être* is to span the generations, was exactly as Bagehot had predicted, and the evidence was precisely in the universal chorus calling upon them to abandon the royal barque to the tide of popular sentiment.

Was this "the real world" to which, in the words of Jeffrey "Lord" Archer, another of NBC's British experts, Diana had led the royal family? And if so, why was it more "real" than the world of emotional restraint? Archer, who was not shy about reminding Tom Brokaw's audience that he had written speeches for Mrs. Thatcher (though not,

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surely, the one expressing atheistic principles about "society"?)—also told a story about how the applause for Lord Spencer's effusion had started from the back and how this was "another example of people power." In fact, Archer's observation was a perfect illustration of the otherwise unacknowledged worth of reticence, for in the space of three or four sentences he had managed to reveal not only that, in the course of a long and distinguished "political career," he had written speeches for not one but two prime ministers, but also that he was an intimate of the late princess's and had sat in the row right behind the immediate family at the obsequies in the Abbey.

Such shameless self-promotion was of a crasser and more obvious kind, but was still recognizably kin to the sort of manipulative behavior that Diana was mistress of and that almost automatically results when people make their emotions public. A too-little-known corollary of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle dictates that the instant emotions are submitted for the world's observation, they turn into something else. Genuine emotion can never be observed, for as soon as it is observed it becomes, to a greater or lesser extent, manipulative. But this is a law of moral physics to which the media must turn a resolutely blind eye and against which it must maintain its own version of the stiff upper lip.

The range of journalistic emotions is almost comically limited to sloppy sentimentality and a melodramatic but bogus moral outrage. Both were fully on display during Diana Week. The sentimentality was often, like that of Lord Archer or Clive James (who wrote an embarrassing account of his intimacy with the princess for *The New Yorker*), a function of journalistic access to people who make news. One of the most hilarious examples of how, in the journalistic mind, all other human qualities save that of access and openness amount to little, was provided by Katherine Graham's memoir of Diana in *The Washington Post*. Recalling an occasion shortly after their meeting on Martha's Vineyard in 1994 when Diana came to play tennis with her and showed herself impressively down to earth, Mrs. Graham recalled how,

> as I was driving her home after the game, she talked lovingly about her sons. "I want them to grow up knowing there are poor people as well as palaces," she said. As time went on, I observed her making great efforts to be there for them. In between her appearances this spring for the Red Cross in Washington and the sale of her dresses in New York, she returned to England to see them.

And, with such attention, how could they fail to realize that there were poor people as well as palaces in the world? Yet similar inanities issued from the lips of journalist after journalist who did not have the advantage of having played tennis with the princess on Martha's Vineyard. I tell you, the profession does not forget its benefactors.

The bogus outrage was at first directed at the press itself, or that part of it known as the paparazzi, who were said by some to have caused the princess's death by riding on their motorbikes too close to her car in order to take photographs of her. Then the story was that they had failed to assist the princess and the others in the car in their distress, but had continued to snap their pictures as they lay dying. Of course it is possible that both things may be true. But then, by the time of Charles Spencer's scathing words about the wicked tabloids who had dared to question the purity of his sister's motives in doing good works, the indictment of the press had become very much generalized.

It is true that the media had a lot of outrage to spare for the royal family, but it should not surprise us that so much of it was seemingly self-directed. The media thrive on such self-flagellation. Tom Brokaw on NBC, for instance, told the story of how some of his colleagues had hired a taxi and offered the driver a "generous" tip. This the driver had refused, scornfully remarking: "I

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don't want *your* money." Tom loved it, saying that he and other media folk were forever making "subjective judgments about groups of people and now they're making subjective judgments about us." Such self-critical tendencies directed not only toward the bad behavior of virtually every member of the media lower in the food chain than oneself but at oneself, too, serves the purpose of reinforcing journalistic conceit. It confirms one as a member of a secular priesthood charged with the weighty business of instructing the rest of us in our civic duties.

Moreover, the paparazzi are to be so roundly condemned not because they killed Diana (though it would be wonderful to be able to pin that on them, too) but because they are ever-present reminders of what journalism actually is, as opposed to what the journalistic mandarins want us to think it is. Some of the most comical statements about the paparazzi were made by Mrs. Graham, proprietress of *The Washington Post*, who called them "commercial," and Diane Sawyer, who makes more than a million dollars a year and said that they "basically chase people for money." Dan Rather, who probably makes six or seven million a year, called them "entrepreneurs." These were media aristocrats who were looking down their noses, like the bad old, "stodgy" royal family, at those in trade. And is there not something riotously funny about the incomparably stodgy *New York Times* solemnly editorializing about how "dottily remote" the royal family was from the grieving in the streets? Such unanimity, thoughtfully and independently arrived at, is not in nature. It is patently a product of the general hysteria, to which journalists are more than commonly susceptible.

This brings up the one way in which, as I wrote in the beginning, I think there really are—or at least may be—permanent effects to be expected from the princess's life and death. For the most striking thing to me about the appalling splendor of the media's tributes to her was the unanimity with which the audience and everyone who managed to get in front of a camera were meant to acquiesce in whatever self-promotion or bad taste managed to thrust itself upon our notice with the excuse that it was an authentic expression of someone's feelings. If anyone was prepared to censure the unspeakable vulgarity of Elton John's rewritten "Candle in the Wind" or the bad taste of any of the film stars (even including the mother of JonBenet Ramsey) who sought publicity by claiming to share with Diana in her martyrdom to the paparazzi, he or she did so quietly and out of the range of the cameras.

True, it's only the media behaving as the media has always done, but in the past there was at least the possibility of a check upon its rampant bad taste. There was enough of a residual sense of shame, even among television journalists, that one could imagine them listening patiently to, and without consigning them to perdition, points of view with which they did not agree. The disappearance of that sense of shame is, at any rate, what I fancy may be behind what was to me the most sustained instance of bad taste in the whole of Diana Week. This was Peter Jennings's commentary on the funeral for ABC. Dan Rather at times ran him close, but it was Jennings who really had the power to shock with his constant inane patter while the funeral cortège (or "cortage" as the reporter Cynthia McFadden had it—perhaps because all the flowers made her think of corsages) passed through the streets of London.

The BBC commentary, anchored by David Dimbleby, at least had the virtue of maintaining radio silence for great stretches, so that all we could hear was the clop-clop of the horses' hooves and the minutely tolling of the Abbey's bell. Occasionally, it is true, Dimbleby could not forbear to notice that "everything is silent and still," but for the most part the unadvertised silence was genuinely moving. Jennings, by contrast, never had the chance to notice it, as he was constantly chattering, often coming out with little gems like this:

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> Let me explain to some of our younger viewers who Camilla Parker Bowles is. She's a long-time friend of Prince Charles for many many years, and when Princess Diana's marriage to Prince Charles was coming apart, Princess Diana gave a very famous interview to the British Broadcasting Corporation here in which she said there was a third woman [*sic*] in her marriage from the beginning. And that was Prince Charles's friend, Lady Camilla Bowles [*sic*] who was in fact married to a friend of Prince Charles's.

I wonder what some of our younger viewers made of that. Surely, if they enjoyed being patronized by being told that Winston Churchill was "Britain's great wartime leader," not many other people can have done so. But the infantilization of the commentary was also a part of the message. Here, for example, is what Jennings's patter had to say as the cortège passed through Horse Guards Parade:

> For those of you who have been tourists in London, especially you kids, this is maybe where you've come and you've seen one of the guards sitting on a horse and you've tried to talk to him and he didn't say anything to you. This is always frustrating for young visitors to London when they get nothing back from the guards outside any of the royal palaces here . . .

All this must be about to change now, one supposes. But Jennings, with his all-encompassing wisdom, is ready for that, too:

> It has been very difficult for members of some generations in Britain this week to comprehend what is going on. A member of the older generation was heard to say here earlier this week that his generation was (you know) brought up and trained to fight Hitler, and that it was difficult to understand a generation when all it took was love—to pick up on the great Beatles song. And the rock 'n' roll princess. But over the several days since Diana was killed, even those people here and around the world who at first were stunned by the reaction and uncertain about the reaction, have come to understand that what is being seen here has enormous meaning in many ways—about celebrity, about monarchy in the twentieth and eve of the twenty-first century, and certainly about the press and about television. There are people here, as there are at home, who believe that our participation in this and the extent to which we have covered it has simply given it a renewed adrenaline at almost every minute. But in London today the tradition of modern and traditional is inescapably real.

In any well-run republic, a man capable of uttering drivel like that on the public airwaves would be subject to beheading. I fancy he might even be summarily executed in Saudi Arabia. It is only the decadence and softness of the present royal family and its all too abundant "compassion" which allows him to live in order that he might drivel again.

Writing about the three major networks' prominent displays of their logos on screen during the services, Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* noted that "the funeral of a cherished public figure hardly seems the time or place to advertise, but network promotion departments are almost vicious in their relentlessness." He does not see that the whole point of the exercise for everybody involved on screen, and everybody who talked to the camera, was self-advertisement. Why else do people make a point of expressing their grief in public instead of keeping it hidden as they used to do in the bad old stiff-upper-lip days? Why show other people how much they feel, unless they think such feelings a credit to themselves? That Diana's funeral should have become a rather comical orgy of such attempted emotional manipulation before the cameras was wonderfully appropriate, since she herself in her lifetime had pioneered the technique brilliantly. She must have been very pleased, looking on from wherever she is now.

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Books

"Chicagoland" chronicler

by Philip Terzian

If the name of Robert R. McCormick does not exactly resonate these days, there's a good reason for it: he was a newspaper proprietor and, by contemporary standards, very much on the wrong side of history's street. A benevolent autocrat, whose views were reflected in the pages of his product, the *Chicago Tribune*, he was an isolationist in the middle of the American Century, implacable enemy of the burgeoning welfare state, and a "character" inhabiting the corporate world, who wielded power and exerted much influence. And yet, outside his Midwestern domain, he is now largely forgotten and, if remembered, much misunderstood.

Let this be a lesson to all journalists with pretensions. Across the Potomac River from Washington, another eccentric newspaper proprietor, Allen Neuharth, has just opened a museum—with the ghastly, if inevitable, name of Newseum—which seeks to attach some form of immortality to reporters and editors. This is, to say the least, an exercise in futility. For even in the midst of its widescreen exhibits and flashy memorabilia, the Newseum subsists on the subject of the news, not the nature of the product, or the people who print and broadcast information.

In literature, journalists may be counted on the fingers of a single, dismembered hand; in history, journalists barely register at all. They are famous, sometimes notorious, in their day; but with very few exceptions, once time marches on and the newsprint turns yellow, their monuments are covered, like Ozymandias's, by lone and level sands.

In Colonel McCormick's case, that is too bad; for he was, by any measure, one of the great personalities of modern American history and, in his day, a player of some importance in the national drama. He was also, for what it is worth, a publisher of genius, a shrewd capitalist with impeccable judgment about news and a visionary sense of the business of journalism. In this judicious and entertaining volume, Richard Norton Smith has rescued McCormick from undeserved obscurity, and answered the biographer's two basic questions: what was the subject like, and why should we profit from reading about him?[1]

Robert Rutherford McCormick was the grandson of Joseph Medill, a founder of the Republican party, friend of Lincoln, and Gilded Age investor. Medill's interest in the *Chicago Tribune* descended through two daughters, Katharine McCormick and Elinor Patterson, and devolved upon a quartet of bright, tormented grandchildren: Robert McCormick, known as Bertie to his family; his brother Medill, later a U.S. senator and suicide; Joseph Patterson, co-founder of the

1 *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955*, by Richard Norton Smith; Houghton Mifflin, 597 pages, $35.

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New York Daily News, America's first tabloid; and Eleanor (Cissy) Patterson, publisher of the *Washington Times-Herald*, and famous femme fatale.

Of the four, the least was expected of Bertie, a younger brother much abused by his malignant mother, and ignored by his syphilitic diplomat father. And yet it was Bertie who made the most of his birthright, and whose name endures at all in our time.

Like many ambitious people in history, Robert McCormick was a lonely, sensitive lad who grew up to become a very complicated adult. Easily wounded by criticism, he nursed grievances, disguised his emotions, craved maternal love, and constructed for himself an insouciant manner and eccentric disposition. Much is made, in this book and elsewhere, of McCormick's public rivalry with his prep-school classmate and nemesis, Franklin Roosevelt, whose New Deal politics and global ambitions represented nearly everything McCormick abhorred.

Yet while their public philosophies were different, their personal similarities are striking. The sons of awesome mothers, haunted by failure, both saw themselves as lords of the manor, adopting the habits of the English squirearchy: Roosevelt in the White House, and McCormick from atop the famous Tribune Tower. FDR hid behind a mask of good cheer, pince-nez, cape, and cigarette holder, and fancied himself a naval strategist. Bertie McCormick was a gallant gentleman-artillerist in World War I, a fox-hunting gent with a clipped silver mustache, stentorian voice, and chilly exterior. Both excelled as radio performers, endured disastrous marriages, and found meaning in their lives by acquiring power.

Both succeeded, of course, and against great odds. In Roosevelt's case, the obstacle was physical; for McCormick it was—well, not exactly mental, but certainly emotional. Insanity lurked in the McCormick family, and the hopes of the Colonel's mother were fastened on the prospects of her elder son, Medill. Bertie was shipped off to a series of schools, first in England, then at Groton, and finally Yale, to none of which he ever felt a semblance of allegiance. He returned to Chicago to pursue a career of patrician civic-mindedness, first as president of the city's Sanitary District, and then as a reformist Republican alderman.

Then came the Great War. While his brother Medill combined a political career with bouts of madness, McCormick and his cousin Joseph Patterson, with whom he had jointly managed the *Tribune*, sailed off to Europe, first as correspondents, then as soldiers, and returned well-prepared to exploit their inheritance. After the Armistice, Captain Patterson decamped to the *New York Daily News*, their joint invention, and Colonel McCormick settled in at the *Tribune*.

It was a subject of speculation and droll humor in subsequent years, but McCormick's military title was fully earned. He had been commissioned in the Illinois National Guard, and fought bravely and successfully on the Western Front with the First Division. Indeed, he renamed his family home for a desperate battle in which he and his troops withstood a massive German attack (Cantigny), and when he died, he was buried in his faded khaki uniform.

As a human being, the Colonel is not so easily drawn; but Richard Norton Smith paints a vivid canvas, without delving too deep into psychoanalysis. McCormick was a mass of contradictory impulses. He cherished a lifelong interest in military matters; but after his own service was finished in 1918, he resolutely opposed American action, except in defense of the homeland. He was an imperious, at times capricious, employer, capable of extraordinary rudeness and generosity. He was, at once, comically self-important and self-deprecating. Never happier than when riding to hounds, he championed, indeed romanticized, the American yeoman, and bemoaned the snobbery and decadence of the rich. A stalwart advocate of what we would today call family values, he had the lifelong habit of pursuing married women.

A regular visitor to London, McCormick reviled British institutions, continually

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warning against perfidious Albion. His ambiguous attitude toward English civilization even took the form of a Shaw-like campaign for language reform: Americans spoke American, he declared, and the *Tribune* was saddled with simplified spelling (grafic, biografy, buro) until McCormick's death. He enjoyed the benefits of a prototypical elite New England education, and yet detested and distrusted the East and its "alien" culture.

For McCormick, the heart of the republic had been created by the Northwest Ordinance, adopted two years before the Constitution, which barred slavery from new states north of the Ohio River and pushed the Anglo-American settlers westward. Here was situated McCormick's Arcadia, the hub of which he christened Chicagoland, and chronicled with vigilant, sometimes suffocating, passion in his self-proclaimed World's Greatest Newspaper.

In the history of journalism, McCormick is, by present-day conventions, a problematic figure. He represents everything we are instructed to deplore in the ownership of newspapers. McCormick did not just calculate the growth and expansion of the *Tribune*'s business empire, creating a behemoth which still prospers; he dominated its news and editorial columns as well. McCormick's opinions—his quirks, crusades, obsessions, and convictions—were not just well known because he was a prominent public figure; they were a daily feature of the *Tribune*'s content, and writers and editors were expected to conform.

Since on most domestic and foreign issues McCormick was fighting a rear-guard action, his influence is now considered to be pernicious. Of course, this was not so obvious to the hundreds of thousands of people who purchased his newspaper, or shared his views, and found their voice in the dinosaur Colonel.

Which leads us to another matter: McCormick as publisher, politics aside. It is altogether too easy to deplore his kind of singular, arbitrary journalism: the personification of A. J. Liebling's famous notion that freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one. But McCormick was a vigorous, unparalleled presence: The *Tribune*'s tone was unmistakable, and its product was consistent. What is the name of his successor in Chicago, and what does the *Tribune* represent today? By contrast, the publisher of the nation's preeminent newspaper, *The New York Times*, is best known for his views on affirmative action in the newsroom. McCormick gave the *Tribune* a distinctive identity, and encouraged good writing and enduring innovations. He understood the stakes in policy disputes and recognized the bonds of merchant to customer: comic strips, sports scores, pertinent information.

McCormick's resistance to government intrusion—prior restraint, wartime censorship, Federal regulation—might have appeared retrograde in Roosevelt's time; but his lonely expeditions, and taste for subversion, may be read another way in the world of chain ownership, or the era of the Pentagon Papers and the Internet. Above all, he succeeded in a difficult balancing act: the *Tribune* was entertaining as well as authoritative, and McCormick had an evident gift for making money.

To be sure, in the long run, it doesn't add up to much. The Tribune Company is one of many large corporations, and the issues which the author so skillfully records—Illinois politics, civic corruption in the 1920s, the purchase of Canadian forests for paper, the printing of war plans on the eve of Pearl Harbor—grow less important with the passage of time. But that, after all, is the enduring story of journalism. The peculiar legacy of Col. Robert McCormick is that the empire he invented bears little resemblance to the kingdom he ruled: the missing element, of course, is the Colonel himself, and his animated, dexterous, autocratic hand. It is probably true, as the author suggests, that McCormick's day is past, not likely to return. It is equally true that progress, at times, leaves the world a little duller.

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Blockbuster homiletics

Carl Sagan Billions & Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium. Random House, 241 pages, $24

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

The world's most public astronomer lost his two-year battle with blood disease on December 20, 1996. He was sixty-two. That day, Cornell's chairman of astronomy, Yervant Terzian, issued a statement: "Carl was a candle in the dark. He was, quite simply, the best science educator in the world this century." This was no hasty eulogy. By the common measures of "best"—number of persons taught, medals and honors, extraordinary production of bestselling books and film, worldwide media stardom—Terzian's assessment of Carl Sagan was sober truth. Moreover, he was a working scientist who made fundamental contributions to planetary science, exobiology, and space exploration. His last work was the book *Billions and Billions*: he never finished the acknowledgements. Sagan wrote the final chapter, as its title indicates, "In the Valley of the Shadow." The book needed only a postscript and a short epilogue from his wife and collaborator, Ann Druyan.

Celebrity and cultural influence such as Sagan commanded energize detractors. Sometimes, the derogations testify anyway to the high quality of the target, and diagnose the critics better than the object. And, what is *not* criticized in the productions of celebrity can be symptomatic of malady in the culture. So it is for responses to Carl Sagan. *Billions and Billions* and its predecessor, *The Demon-Haunted World*, have had and will yet have fulsome praise and bitter attack. These essays are his signature mix of glad and evil tidings; they reveal the motives of his public (as opposed to scientific) life.

Like his other works of popular science and hortation, *Billions and Billions* is wonderfully accessible. It had to be: many chapters were first published in the sovereign Sunday supplement, *Parade* (of which Sagan was a contributing editor, along with others such as Dr. Joyce Brothers, Larry L. King, and Norman Mailer). Other pieces, revised from elsewhere, are slightly more uphill, but serve like purposes. On this most public of Sagan's activities, an unexpected critic, geneticist Richard Lewontin, wrote disdainfully but with a hint of justice, that Sagan "has become the most widely known, widely read, and widely seen popularizer of science since the invention of the video tube. His only rival in the *haute vulgarization* of science is Stephen Jay Gould, whose *vulgarizations* are often very *haute* indeed, and whose intellectual concerns are quite different." But Lewontin approves of Gould's "intellectual concerns," not of Sagan's; and thereby hangs a tale. First, however: what were Sagan's intellectual concerns? In a nutshell: to teach the uniqueness of science for getting at truths about the physical world and the place of *Homo sapiens* and the other species in it; and, to insist upon the sharp double edge (his metaphor) of the sword of science, one good (knowledge), the other evil (technology gone wrong). If enough people cherish the knowledge and act on it, he believed, the perils of humanity and of Earth can be faced, and reduced or eliminated. Salvation is choosing the good edge and blunting the evil one.

Of our perils he was the most vociferous—and (scientifically) best qualified—prophet. In *Billions and Billions*, famous good cheer just perceptibly frayed, he almost identified with Cassandra: doomed to foretell the future and to be disbelieved. But of course he wasn't disbelieved. Converts enormously outnumbered foes. He calculated environmental perils, often cleverly and accurately, and made the calculus transparent for the innumerate. Sometimes, though, he exaggerated for political effect (as in the cautionary marketing of nuclear winter) or neglected to calculate at all (as when propagating such enviro-scares as the falling sperm count).

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He was both scientist and teacher, but also a political performer. He exulted in celebrity. Page 2 of *Billions and Billions* sports a photo of him with Johnny Carson, all smiles and old friends on the ultimate talk show. He was 100 percent sure of his message's truth (which is not so unusual: how many public intellectuals are not 100 percent sure?). He delivered it to the great as well as on television. He conveyed it to a thousand religious and parliamentary luminaries at conferences in Oxford and Moscow. Our world is in grave danger of environmental and moral collapse, he said, threatened by climatic upheavals, excessive ultraviolet radiation, militarism, nuclear weapons, industrialization, and not least by our ancient lust for zero-sum games of hunting and killing (he made the game theory accessible). The heritage of our evolution: "Pleistocene emotions but without Pleistocene social safeguards." The threat, he urged, can be met if religion, with its power of moral suasion, and science, with its grip on the real world, join forces to save the planet and to free minds of nonsense. Sagan thought that he knew the haunting demons, and who, if they really wanted to, could exorcise them.

Such pleas have been effective. Convince yourself, if necessary, by following religion in the media. Throughout the West, the old injunctions to be fruitful and multiply, to smite the faith's enemies hip and thigh, to have dominion over Earth and its creatures, are rejected. Replacing them is our new, noninvasive stewardship (about which Sagan has much to say in the book). We are mere sextons of Nature's (or God's) dwelling-place—not its rulers. Sagan's well-crafted science lessons swim in homilies. His secular humanism, despised by fundamentalists, is transmuted from many a pulpit to a kind of Gaia worship.

What have his detractors to urge against him? Among strong religionists the complaints are the obvious. Sagan is a materialist. His overtures to religion are hypocritical. David N. Menton, of Computers for Christ in San Jose, cites Sagan's "crass materialism" and "scientism" as a competing faith to theism, so Sagan's scientific assertions can have no special claim to truth. Among anti-evolutionists, he is simply wrong. What he takes for evidence of organic evolution is, really, evidence against it; he has, according to Dr. Larry Vardiman of the Institute for Creation Research, "rejected out of hand the evidences he has clearly seen for design of the universe" and is willfully "blinded to the evidence that God exists." For the cultists at *The Velikovskian*, his is the hubris of official science, "glaringly unscientific and unscholarly."

These judgments get a boost from an unexpected quarter: academics adopting, as regards natural science, some form of social constructionism, the argument that "scientific knowledge" is made by social forces, which play a decisive role in its content. In a blast against Sagan and other authors such as E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and Lewis Thomas, Richard Lewontin, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, contrasts them unfavorably with Gould, who is "primarily concerned . . . with what the nature of organisms, living and dead, can reveal about the social construction of scientific knowledge." (I trust this was a surprise to Gould.) Resentful of the suggestion that he, Lewontin, is of the "academic left," something "recently invented but undefined," he charges Sagan and the others with promoting a flood of unsupported science claims and confusing truth with freedom. "It is not the truth that makes you free," he asserts. "It is your possession of the power to discover the truth. Our dilemma is that we do not know how to provide that power." Explaining science to the public is thus hopeless: the masses should be taught how to get power.

Well, what of these criticisms? Was Sagan just a media darling, a philosophical naïve ignorant of postpositivism? Was he a hypocrite about religion, hoping to eject God from culture? Did he conspire against the threat of genius—like that of Velikovsky? Was *Cosmos* just smoke and mir-

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rors? No. Lewontin does not need to depend, as he claims to, on Sagan for "truths" (scare quotes are obligatory) about astronomy. He can acquire truths with his own eyes, on the TV screen, as hard data arrive from, yes, billions of miles away in space. The planets are where astronomy says they are. Whatever social forces acted upon Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo; whatever Newton's alchemical hang-ups, science kept the wheat and discarded the chaff. It had little to do with struggles for political power and everything to do with the way good science works.

Is Sagan hypocritical about religion? No. He stated his beliefs and doubts. To be sure those depend upon a naturalistic metaphysics; but he did not hide it. Moreover he supported his beliefs with evidence. Evidence, to some reasonable standard thereof, is what the Institute for Creation Research and *The Velikovskian* have never provided. Sagan's overtures to the world's religions were a recognition of their power over minds and of their proper moral mission. They were a plea for help.

There *is* a little problem with *Billions and Billions*, though. Not that the science is wrong. Most (but not quite all) of it is as well-confirmed as anything we know. Not that it is superficial (some of it is, but what the layman gets from it is sound). Not that he is a materialist disguised as a man of the cloth. He was always forthcoming about his philosophy and able to defend it. The problem is that to succeed in contemporary public debates that have partly to do with science but mostly with something else (on, say, national defense, the environment, abortion), one must immerse facts in a sauce of homily. The facts must not be too many, and they must be packaged entertainingly. Inevitably, then, facts conveyed are facts selected; and the temptation of convenient ones is irresistible. (Lewontin's argument that modern medicine has done nothing about the treatment of cancer is a fine example.) Sagan, like everybody else in the policy game, selected, and interpreted what he had selected.

One instance. Proud of his adventures in U.S.-Soviet moral equivalence and scornful, in the academic way, of the "conservative" notion of Soviet evil, he prepared in 1988 an article on the Soviet Union and America for simultaneous publication in *Parade* and *Ogonyok* (reprinted in *Billions and Billions*). The article lists the crimes against humanity of both sides. The game was to show equal guilt, that at base we and the Soviets are the same, that we should therefore forget old villainies and march toward a future of disarmed cooperation. Three things matter: (1) Sagan's listed crimes include over- or understatements, rhetoric representing inexactly the underlying facts (which exist); (2) overstatements of Western misdeeds are as frequent as understatements of Soviet ones; and (3) the version published in the Soviet Union was, despite the esteem in which Soviet leaders were supposed to hold Sagan, radically censored by them. Facts of the censorship are given in the book, along with a copy of a "gracious" apology, long after the odious fact, by Dr. Georgi Arbatov. Sagan's argument for moral equivalence is demolished by the Soviet censorship. Even so, there is no evidence that Sagan recognized this fact at the time or later. In general, his peers among political and cultural mandarins also fail to recognize such errors. The argument for moral equivalence, ignoring among other things the difference between a free press and implacable censorship, is an example of self-refutation unremarked. It is the dog that did not bark in the night.

Accented vernacular

Bernard Malamud
The Complete Stories. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 400 pages, $30

reviewed by Brooke Allen

"All men are Jews," was one of Bernard Malamud's more enigmatic statements. What exactly did he mean by this epigram? As the

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Jewish shopkeeper in Malamud's first novel, *The Assistant*, says, "If you live, you suffer," and that is the dominant theme throughout Malamud's fiction. Suffering is the essence of life, the mark of what it is to be human, and this has been especially true for the Jewish people. "Being born a Jew meant being vulnerable to history, including its worst errors," as Yakov Bok reflects in *The Fixer*. Frank Alpine, the goyisher hero—or antihero—of *The Assistant*, states the same thing from the outsider's point of view: "That's what they live for . . . to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold onto it the longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew. No wonder they got on his nerves."

Malamud's early life gave rise to this grim philosophy. He was born in 1914 in Brooklyn, to parents who eked out a living as proprietors of a marginal late-night grocery store: a business doomed to failure in the dawn of the supermarket era, and one that he portrayed unforgettably in his fiction. His brother was a schizophrenic, and his mother died when he was fifteen, after which, he said, "I had a stepmother and a thin family life." Malamud graduated from City College during the Depression and went to work as a teacher-in-training in Brooklyn, later becoming a postal clerk and eventually a civil servant for the Census Bureau in Washington. His literary career was forged by dint of long hours of writing put in during the evenings and on weekends; his stories began to be published in little magazines in the early 1940s, and his first novel, *The Natural*, came out in 1952. By the time of his death in 1986, Malamud was generally regarded as one of the foremost writers in the United States and had received the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the American Academy's Gold Medal for Fiction, and, in Italy, the Primo Mondadello.

In spite of the glittering prizes, Malamud remained an admirably modest figure throughout his life, acquiring none of the usual pretensions of the great writer or elder statesman. In Philip Roth's engaging memorial of Malamud in *The New York Times Book Review*, Roth recalled his bemusement at first meeting the older man whose work he revered: Malamud, or "Bern," turned out to be superficially indistinguishable from Roth's father's nebbishy buddies, the New Jersey accountants and insurance salesmen whose chatter made up the background music of Roth's childhood memories. Malamud did not leave his origins behind; they remained an integral part of him and inspired many of his novels and stories.

The author of eight novels, Malamud also wrote fifty-five short stories, which have now been united in a single volume. *The Complete Stories* begins with "Armistice" (1940), a wartime tale in which a Jewish grocer in Brooklyn listens with increasing distress to the news from France and chafes at the gloating of a chauvinistically Teutonic meat vendor; it ends with two experimental pieces, "fictive biographies" or "biographed stories" about Alma Mahler and Virginia Woolf, both published in 1984. The stories in between demonstrate the development of an original sensibility as it moves from its rootedness in a specific time and place, its exact and poetic rendition of the heartbreaking lives of poor immigrants in New York, into a broad and masterly imagination at home in every milieu.

It is certain that Malamud was a serious writer, one of the most serious in American literature; but "Leid macht auch lachen," as one of his characters says, and humor is never too far from the surface of even his most tragic tales. He was the first important writer to take the Yiddish-accented vernacular of American Jews beyond the realm of Borscht Belt shtick and turn it into a literary language, inventing, in the process, a totally characteristic style of dialogue that is rich in subtle humor however fraught the subject under discussion. Malamud was thus able to mingle tragedy and farce, not only in content but in style as well, achieving an enviable state of artistic grace.

Malamud's very best stories are the ones

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that successfully fuse these elements: for example "The Jewbird" (1963), which Richard Gilman in his memorial piece for Malamud declared to be his best, a judgment with which I am inclined to agree. In this contemporary, facetious fable, a skinny bird with "frazzled black wings" flies into the Lower East Side apartment of the Cohen family. "Gevalt, a pogrom!," it exclaims upon landing on the dining table; it proclaims itself to be Schwartz, "a Jewbird" who is fleeing "Anti-Semeets." He begs for asylum, promising that he doesn't eat much—"If you haven't got matjes, I'll take schmaltz"—and saying that he is old and needs a roof over his head. "You know how it is at my age. I like the warm, the windows, the smell of cooking. I would also be glad to see once in a while the *Jewish Morning Journal* and have now and then a schnapps because it helps my breathing, thanks God." Edie and little Maurie welcome the bird, but Cohen himself, a big angry man, feels that the bird is crafty and resents his presence in his home, although the bird proves his usefulness by helping Maurie with his schoolwork and improving the child's grades. Eventually, when his wife and son's backs are turned, the sinister Cohen succeeds in ejecting the unhappy bird, who meets a violent death at the hands of "Anti-Semeets."

In this way Malamud uses the ancient convention of the fable to bring the simplicity and the immediacy of direct moral choice to the lives of his very contemporary characters. Another story employing such a device is "Angel Levine" (1955). Manischevitz, a middle-aged tailor, has recently suffered the loss both of his children and his business. Now his wife, Fanny, appears to be mortally ill. Manischevitz prays to God for help, and not long afterwards a black man visits him, introducing himself as Alexander Levine. "You said Levine?," Manischevitz asks; "You are maybe Jewish?" Assenting, Levine adds, "I have recently been disincarnated into an angel. As such, I offer you my humble assistance." Manischevitz is understandably skeptical, but as Fanny continues to waste away he gives in and runs Alexander Levine to earth at a Harlem hotspot. Eventually, he takes the risk of seeming like an idiot and asks for his help. Levine sprouts wings and ascends into the sky; Manischevitz hurries home to his wife, now miraculously restored and wielding a dust mop. "A wonderful thing, Fanny," he cries, echoing centuries of surprise encounters. "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere."

It is a light story that has its later, and darker, counterpart, "The Silver Crown" (1972). Albert Gans's father is dying of cancer. Albert comes across a business card that says in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, "Heal the Sick. Save the Dying. Make a Silver Crown." Curious, he tracks down Lifschitz, a retired rabbi living in seedy circumstances. Lifschitz produces fulsome testimonials and states that the crown will cost $986. Albert finds the price a bit stiff, and he is far from convinced that the cure will be efficacious. "Suppose I am a non-believer?," he asks. "Will the crown work if it's ordered by a person who has his doubts?" But the rabbi reassures him. "Doubts we all got. We doubt God and God doubts us. This is natural on account of the nature of existence. Of this kind doubts I am not afraid so long as you love your father." Albert goes along with the plan, but he is never really pleased with it, regretting the money and fearing that Lifschitz will prove to be a charlatan. In the end, thrown into uncontrollable turmoil by his unaddressed fears and rage, he rejects his father: "He hates me, the son of a bitch, I hope he croaks." And the father, in his faraway hospital bed, does so.

All of the stories have religious implications, but Malamud's version of religion is decidedly a moral rather than a mystic one. His characters tend to be at turning points in their lives, faced with morally momentous decisions, and they are symbolically either saved or damned according to the course of action they choose. Malamud's emphasis on moral choice is strongly red-

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olent of the great Russian novelists he admired, especially Dostoyevsky.

Not all of Malamud's ideas are equally effective. He is certainly not immune to sentimentality, as is evident in "The Lady of the Lake," a corny and simplistic fairy tale. Henry Levin, a young American visiting Italy, is entranced by the magical Isola del Dongo in Lake Como. Escaping from the tourist group to which he is attached, he meets a beautiful and mysterious girl, who introduces herself as Isabella del Dongo, daughter of the island's ancient family. When she unexpectedly asks Henry whether he is Jewish, he denies it, believing that his background would be a liability with her. The two fall in love, but predictably, the girl turns out to be no aristocrat but the daughter of the island's poor Jewish gardener, and although she loves Henry she is determined to marry no one but a Jew; in denying his identity, Henry loses his dream.

Malamud also has a habit of spinning off into slightly more baroque and portentous extremes than his vivid characters, grounded so solidly in the earth, can sustain. This is especially noticeable in the six stories that were originally published together as *Pictures of Fidelman*. Fidelman (which, it should be noted, was the maiden name of Malamud's mother) is a would-be painter and art historian who moves to Rome to write what he is certain will be a groundbreaking study of Giotto. In the first story, "The Last Mohican" (1958), he no sooner sets foot on Italian soil than he is accosted by Susskind, a fellow American gone obviously to seed. Susskind greets Fidelman with a "Shalom," and Fidelman hesitantly returns the greeting, "uttering the word—so far as he recalled—for the first time in his life." This observation alone is enough to set Fidelman up as an unevolved and unrooted character by Malamud's standards, and the rest of the story sequence is concerned with tearing apart Fidelman's second-hand ideas about life and art and his ill-constructed ego, and re-creating him artistically, sexually, and spiritually. Although the stories are full of intelligence and frequent instances of the absurd, sometimes wild humor in which Malamud specialized, Malamud's conceits eventually become exaggerated and pretentious, leaving the imperfect and human Fidelman far behind.

The real question about Malamud, to paraphrase the old commercial for Levy's Rye Bread, is: Do you have to be Jewish to enjoy Bernard Malamud? The answer is a qualified "no." You don't have to be; but, as one of Malamud's own characters might say, it couldn't hurt. There is a very real sense in which Jewishness, the fact and essence of being Jewish, takes center stage in Malamud's stories, and it can make a gentile reader feel slightly disoriented and out-of-touch. Such is not the case for gentile readers of Roth or Bellow; nor, I would venture, are readers of Updike who do not happen to be Yankee Protestants similarly handicapped. Nevertheless, Malamud's broad and generous vision of human life, his remarkable skill at making us recognize the plight of the Jew as the plight of mankind, marks him as one of the most important writers of his generation, not only in our own country but throughout the world.

Comic contempt

Paul Theroux The Collected Stories. Viking, 660 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Peter Schwendener

The keynote of this collection by Paul Theroux is sounded when the narrator of a story set among U.S. Embassy members in London observes, "Ambassador Noyes had another trait I had noticed in many slow-witted people: he was tremendously interested in philosophy." In another story, an American schoolteacher in Africa, proudly ignorant of everything but the right way to ingratiate himself with the local women, hastily puts on a shirt that hasn't been ironed, that is, a shirt laden with the eggs of a certain insect whose "larvae hatched at body heat and burrowed into the skin to

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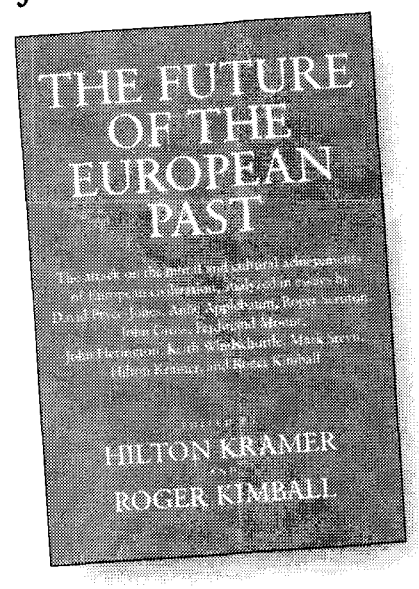

Edited by HILTON KRAMER *and* ROGER KIMBALL

In essays first published in *The New Criterion,* ten distinguished critics analyze the attack on the moral and cultural achievements of European civilization. From the decline of historical memory to the sway of pop culture to the pervasiveness of deconstruction and structuralism in academic inquiry, these trenchant reflections—marked by wit, independence, and commanding intelligence—define the struggle and assess the fate of our cultural legacy. The contributors include David Pryce-Jones, Anne Applebaum, Roger Scruton, John Gross, Ferdinand Mount, John Herington, Keith Windschuttle, Mark Steyn, Hilton Kramer, and Roger Kimball.

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mature. Of course, laundry was always ironed—even drip-dry shirts—to kill them. Everyone who knew Africa knew that."

Theroux's refusal to shrink from the physically disgusting, accompanied by a vaguely sadistic delight in the varieties of human self-deception and self-importance, coexists with a resolutely old-fashioned desire to entertain. He does not often make the reader laugh, but he dazzles us with his powers of mimicry, linguistic brilliance, and—something extremely rare in contemporary fiction—a strong tendency to aphorism: "There is something athletic, something physical, in the way the most successful people reach decisions"; "There is a personal tone in some poetry that is so intimate it gives nothing away—so private it sounds anonymous"; "English is perfect for diplomats and lovers." Some of Theroux's aphorisms merge with their fictional settings, often transmuting themselves into effective dialogue: "'When English people go to California,' I said, 'they either come back the next day or stay there for the rest of their lives.'" Others rest uneasily on the fictional surface, striking the reader as detachable wise sayings.

The collection is divided into five parts. The first three are pleasantly eclectic, taking in betrayed husbands; aged alcoholic writers victimized by bustling young publishers ("Miss Bristow"); various academics, mostly American and all objects of pronounced authorial dislike; and a smattering of artists, some real, some charlatans, all martyrs to uncontrollable vanity. The acrid quality of Theroux's imagination meshes nicely with the subject matter of a story entitled "Biographical Notes for Four American Poets." The four in question are convened at Amherst as participants in a seminar entitled "Poetry: Meaning and Being." One, Wilbur Parsons (who pops up in other stories here), is not vice president but *president* of an insurance company and makes no bones about comparing himself to Wallace Stevens. As the poets wait for the seminar to begin, he explains how he "works": "My secretary, Martha, takes my first draft down in shorthand, and then types it up with wide margins, triple spaced. I work like blazes on that, penciling in words, crossing things out, adding new stuff. It's a beautiful mess when I'm through with it, like one of Balzac's galley proofs." The purity of contempt here is reminiscent of *The Dunciad*, and one enjoys it in the same way one enjoys Pope: avidly, yet with a degree of fear, as one enjoys high-cholesterol food.

The most satisfying parts of this collection are the last two, both of which are long enough, and almost coherent enough in their settings, to count as novels. They both center on the career of an unmarried American diplomat known only as "the consul." The salient fact about the consul, who does eventually marry, is that, whether enduring a "hardship post" in the Malaysian village of Ayer Hitam or shepherding American interests in London, he is extremely good at his job. He knows, for example, how to expedite or postpone the issuing of a visa ("The Honorary Siberian," "Gone West"), and how to deal tactfully with Americans such as the anthropologist Dr. Smith, who descends into the Malaysian bush to study the polygamous Larut tribe and ends up as the chief's ninth wife ("The Butterfly of the Laruts"). Back in London, he knows that it is worth his embassy's while to cultivate a rich, eccentric American poet named Walter Van Bellamy, who is one of Theroux's most terrifying comic creations. A mixture of the worst parts of Ezra Pound and Robert Lowell, Van Bellamy has the gift of unreadability that Theroux very credibly suggests is at the heart of many successful twentieth-century literary careers. "He was famous for the sounds in his poems, what he called 'my throbs and gongs.' It was possible that people were so persuaded by him beforehand that there was little need afterward for them to remember anything." Van Bellamy figures in two of the collection's best stories, "The Odd-Job Man" and a kind of literary horror story entitled "The Exile."

In his short, strangely impassioned Introduction to these stories, Theroux makes

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the plausible assertion that his sizable body of work—novels, travel books, and all—can be taken as so many linked short stories: "In a novel I try to make each chapter as complete and harmonious as a story. My travel books are a sequence of traveler's tales." Confirmation of this is not hard to find: see the brilliantly, savagely self-contained chapter on Anthony Burgess in his recent novel *My Other Life*. (Or is it a memoir? Like Philip Roth, though far less self-consciously, Theroux has recently been undertaking to detonate, or at least gravely disturb, the barrier between fact and fiction). His concern with the nature of fiction is not pedantic or boring enough to make him a postmodernist, yet even these highly traditional stories show that a degree of postmodern convolution is not totally alien to him. He has a dark mind, and is at his abusive best when dealing with characters who happen to be writers, whether real ones like Burgess (whom he appears to admire) or imaginary ones like the unspeakable Walter Van Bellamy, who as we leave him (in "The Exile") is housed in a private madhouse where he has just completed a poem entitled "The Jewnighted States." My advice to living writers, especially poets, who happen to know Paul Theroux personally: spend as little time as possible in his company.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Black Drum*, by Enid Shomer (University of Arkansas Press, $22; $14 paper), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Notebook

Sviatoslav Richter, 1915–1997

by Alexander Coleman

The Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter died in his *dacha* outside Moscow on August 1, 1997. No one could ever have thought of this peerless artist as a dissident within his own country in the manner of Solzhenitsyn or Mstislav Rostropovich. Neither could one think of him or his wildly individualistic behavior during the darkest days of Stalin as anything but a special example of how art could triumph over the most crushing of political repressions. He earned his unparalleled personal freedom within the cultural politics of the Soviet system all right, but at a price—no visas for concerts abroad were allowed until 1959, when he was permitted a short tour of Finland. A debut at Carnegie Hall and an American tour began what was to be a regime of off-and-on summer exiles in France, Italy, and Germany, though he was still most assiduous in giving concerts to his countrymen in remotest Eastern Russia during whirlwind tours, since he felt that they were the people who needed music the most.

A good example of Richter's determination can be found when we observe him playing at Stalin's funeral in 1953, an occasion where many Soviet artists were ordered to perform in memory of the great man. Richter was to play a short piece, appropriately lugubrious. Instead, he chose one of the longer and more elaborate preludes and fugues from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In spite of repeated remonstrations that he had gone beyond the allotted time, Richter finished the particular prelude and fugue in the time needed to perform it. When he finished, he was roughly thrown out of the hall. He said that he could have been shot right then and there, but Kruschev, Malenkov, and Bulganin were too busy struggling for power to be bothered about a "demented" pianist. He also played on an upright piano at Pasternak's funeral in 1960.

In spite of his Germanic family name, Richter was Russian through and through, an ardent Muscovite who was at the very least patriotic if not chauvinistic. He had no interest in "fleeing" to the West on a permanent basis. For both political and personal reasons, he rarely played any Stravinsky, and refused to meet or play with Rostropovich after the latter's triumphal return to Moscow from exile, though they had been long-standing musical partners in the old days. He was born in Zhitomir, Ukraine, the same birthplace as the great operatic basso Alexander Kipnis, born 1891. While someone of Kipnis's generation could make appearances at Berlin, Bayreuth, Glyndebourne, and the Metropolitan Opera, an artist of Richter's generation, born more or less with the Revolution, had harder luck. Richter's father was an organist and instilled some musical culture in his son, but he gave him no rudimentary lessons; the young Sviatoslav seems to have been essentially self-taught.

By the late Thirties, a family name such as

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Richter was not a good one to have in Stalinist Russia, before or after the Hitler-Stalin pact. Richter's mother, a distant descendant of Jenny Lind, used to insist that the family was of a lineage composed of "Russian, German, Polish, Swedish and Hungarian" forebears. At any rate, in an NKVD roundup ordered by the then chief of secret police Lavrenti Beria, seeking out all males with "German-sounding" names, Richter's father was arrested and summarily executed. His mother then married the younger brother of her late husband, and, after a series of frightful vicissitudes, found a home in West Germany. After Richter began his American tour in 1960, distant relatives organized a reunion between mother and son in Flushing, Queens, of all places. The fate of the mother was discovered by the American music critic Paul Moor, who was the first person to inform Richter that his mother was alive and well in West Germany.

While he was still in his early teens, his mother took him to the Odessa Conservatory, where he took his first formal lessons. Odessa was a hothouse of talent at that time—among Richter's colleagues from his student days were Rostropovich, Emil Gilels, and David Oistrakh. Richter was a natural, as they say—he never underwent the torture of a forced practice regime, the scales in all keys, the dreary Hanon and the hateful Czerny. He had monstrous hands. He could fit an octave between his index and little finger, while his full hand could easily encompass a twelfth, that is, an octave plus four notes. Still, he really had little serious intention of being a virtuoso pianist, since opera conducting and singers' accompanist were his early goals. He became proficient at sight-reading full orchestral and opera scores; in house concerts or simply for his own growing repertory, he read through at the piano all of the symphonies of Mahler and Tchaikovsky, all of Wagner and most of Strauss, and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. This pianistic reduction of operatic and orchestral repertory is a fundamental key to an interpretation of Richter's mature playing—he veered away from the purely virtuoso style represented by Vladimir Horowitz to a more orchestrally voiced approach. Richter gave a debut recital in Odessa in 1934, then went to study at the Moscow Conservatory under the renowned teacher Heinrich Neuhaus, who became a spiritual father to Richter. In the fullness of time, Neuhaus would allege that "he hadn't taught Richter a thing," and that the young man had come to him already fully formed. This couldn't possibly be true; perhaps Neuhaus's tutelage had something to do with Richter's idiosyncratic view of the piano repertory in general. For instance, having heard his teacher in a performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5, Richter swore that such a performance could never be equaled. Indeed, he never played it under any circumstances throughout his long career. He never played the popular Piano Concerto No. 4 of Beethoven, either, nor the "Moonlight" Sonata, not the immensely popular Piano Concerto No. 3 of Sergei Rachmaninoff. He would perform only particular works of any composer, and steadfastly refused to record the "complete" piano music of anyone, deeming it an idiocy fed by commercialism. Except for his friend Sergei Prokofiev's arrangements of some of his own orchestral ballets for piano, Richter never played adaptations or transcriptions.

Richter's brooding and unpredictable personality flowed directly in his approach into the piano. There was also a manic side to him that he freely admitted to the rare interviewer. His friend the young Russian pianist André Gavrilov swears that in his hearing, Richter repeated one page of a sonata some seventy times, while one bar might merit one or two hours. On other occasions, he would simply abandon the piano and not touch it for as long as five months. He took a great interest in a number of the other fine arts. More than proficient as a visual artist, he often let the piano go in order to sketch and to paint. His well-appointed Moscow apartment and his *dacha* were full of icons and contemporary

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European paintings from the Impressionists on, and he often said that he preferred the conversation and company of painters well over that of musicians. As he said, "I am an omnivorous creature and I want a lot of things."

Richter was physically stocky, with an oddly pugnacious stage presence. The psychologist Allen Wheelis, observing Richter at a concert, gave some idea of the peculiar atmosphere of a Richter recital, with the evident disconnection between the existence of a listening public and the intensity of concentration on what he was doing. Here is Wheelis's account as quoted in David Dubal's *The Art of the Piano*:

> Sviatoslav Richter strides out on the stage. His face is grim; there is anger in the set of his jaw, but not at the audience. This is a passion altogether his own, a force with which he protects what he is about to do. If it had words, it would say, "What I attempt is important and I go about it with utmost seriousness. I intend to create beauty and meaning, and everything everywhere threatens this endeavor: The coughs, the late-comers, the chatting women in the third row, and always those dangers within, distraction, confusion, loss of memory, weakness of hand, all are enemies of my endeavor. I call up this passion to oppose them, to protect my purpose." Now he begins to play, and the anger I see in his bearing I hear in the voice of Beethoven. It knows nothing of meanness or spite; it is the passion of the doer who will not let his work be swept aside. It hurts no one, it asserts life, it is the force that generates form.

Thanks to "live" recording, we have evidence of Richter's concentration during the most trying of circumstances—almost a laboratory demonstration of this capability within him, if you will. It occurred at the infamous Richter recital given in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1958, and now newly reissued on a Philips CD. The program was par for the course, that is, for Richter. He *opened* the program with the very daunting *Pictures at an Exhibition*, of Modest Mussorgsky, in its original version for piano. After the intermission, he played works of Schubert, Chopin, and Liszt. What makes these performances unusual is the physical condition of the audience: Sofia was plagued by a flu epidemic, and the coughing during the performance of *Pictures* is well nigh unbearable. As the work progresses, one senses Richter driving himself inward. The more they cough, it would seem, the more demonic and unsettling the performance. This recording, along with his hypnotic Schumann recital on Deutsche Grammophon (above all the *Forest Scenes* and the *Fantasy Pieces*) might be a good place to start a new generation listening to Richter's art. He was a great pianist, of course, but he was also beyond category, or, as *Le Monde* put it, "Richter was unique because he was a bit crazy and a bit of an idealist."

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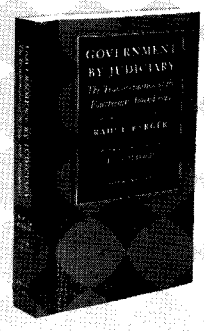

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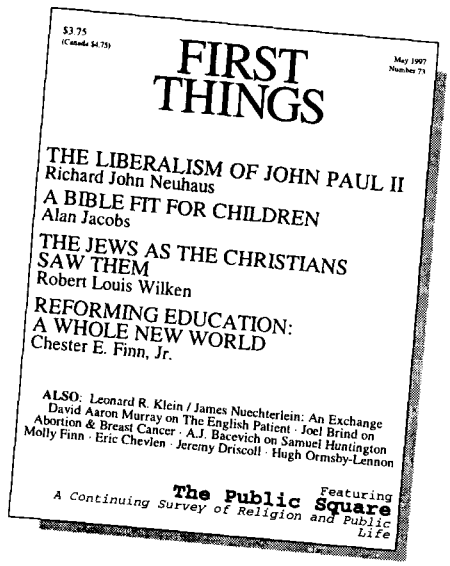
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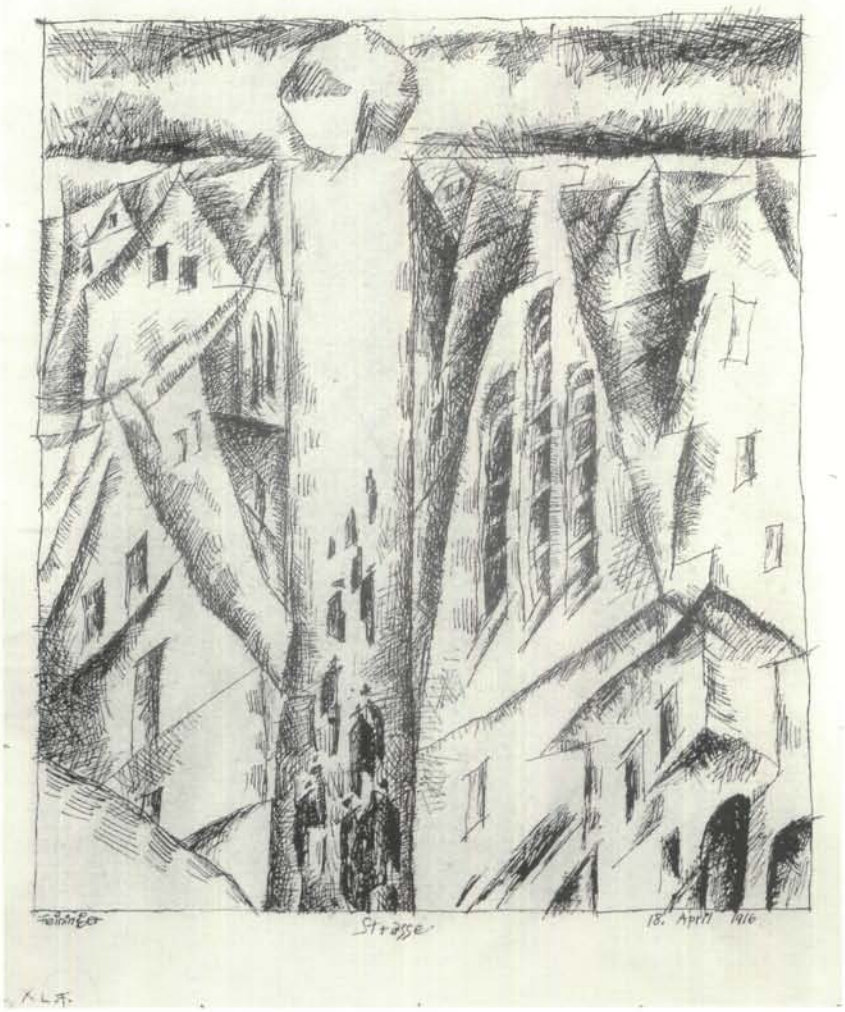

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